WESTERN ACTION

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TREACHEROUS TRIGGERS

by Allen K. Echols

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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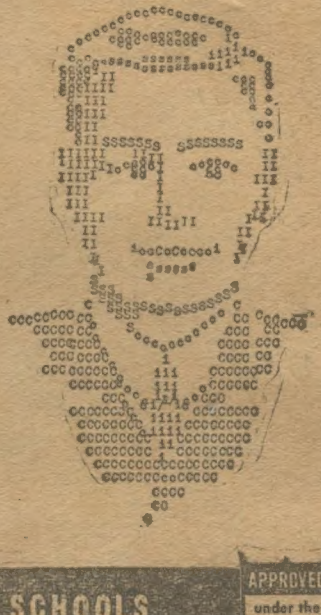

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WESTERN ACTION

VOLUME 14 MARCH, 1950 NUMBER 3

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

Treacherous Triggers

by Allan K. Echols.....8

Only the lawless were united in this country where every man distrusted his neighbor and the law enforcement officers were suspect at best. And Jim Rockwell had to bring men together before renegades could be fought—if he could survive the cattlemen's feuds!

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CAME THE REVOLUTION .... John L. Cooney 78
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ALIAS BEN THOMPSON ..... A. C. Abbott 84
Barry Craigmont had to act as he'd never acted before!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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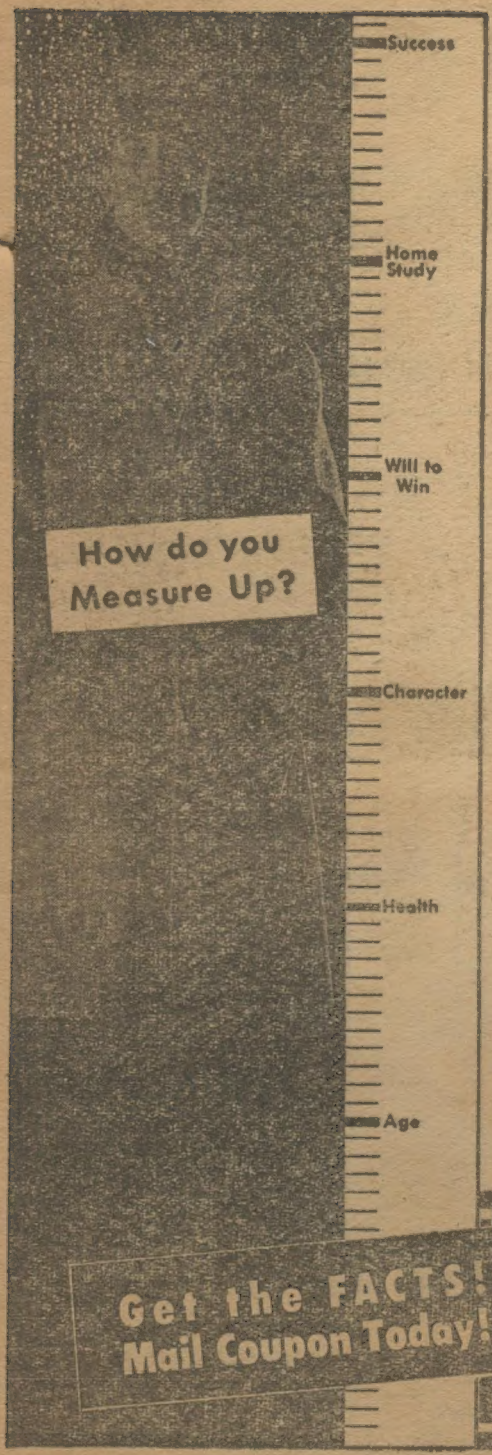

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Treacherous Triggers

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

by Allan K. Echols

(author of "Backfire")

There was no law in this land but the law of the gun and the rope, and clever men had sown carefully to reap a harvest of suspicion and hatred as a cover for their plans. Now, every man distrusted his neighbor, and was easy prey for the hidden wolves. And only a man who could outwit the devil himself could hope to whip Dupree and his followers . . .

The ambusher on the roof dropped his rifle . . . .

IT HAD BEEN a long ride for Jim Rockwell; he had come northward halfway across the state of Texas, and well into the mountainous southeastern corner of the Indian Territory, giving his horse an easy slow ride of it against the summer's heat. Red River, the dividing line between Texas and the Territory, lay fifty miles behind him to the south.

He had been in the wooded hills since daylight, and now at noon he pulled up to a stage station and watered his horse at a hollowed oak log drinking trough fed by a spring pouring out from under a rock. He slipped the bridle off, tied the ani-

mal to a pine sapling near a bunch of crabgrass along with two other saddled horses, and went into the sun-faded pine-board building, hungry and glad for a few minutes of rest.

The darkened interior of the station had a couple of pine tables in a corner of a twelve-foot square room, and another small table with a bowl and pitcher on it and a dingy towel hanging over it. The proprietor was not in sight.

Rockwell caught sight of the two men he assumed to own the two horses outside, and he got the impression that he had interrupted an argument. A heavy built man with a bald-topped head of gray hair sat at one of the tables; the other man stood across the table from him, one foot on a chair and an elbow supported on his raised knee. He seemed to have been pointing at the other man, but his voice stilled suddenly. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room while Rockwell washed the trail dust off his face, hung his hat up on a deerhorn rack, and sat down at the other table.

The standing man turned and gave him the full benefit of a long look which Rockwell returned as he fished for the makings. Rockwell was a full six feet in height; he carried a good hundred and ninety pounds on his frame, but it was all muscle—distributed across his shoulders in his arms and legs—and he did not give the appearance of being a big man. He had gray eyes in a face of ordinary appearance, slightly irregular features and the big bones of a man who followed heavy work and did not tire easily. But he was not the kind that would stand out in a crowd.

The standing man satisfied himself as to Rockwell's physical characteristics, then spoke to him. "You're interrupting a conversation, man. Come back when we're through."

Rockwell showed the man a slow smile that crinkled the sun-seams around his eyes. He seemed to be without guile as he studied the one who had addressed him.

The speaker was a good three inches taller than Rockwell and would have outweighed him by fifty pounds. His hair was the color of bleached oatstraw; his eyebrows were yellow and his eyes plain china blue. His lower jaw was square and projected so that his lower teeth came up over his upper ones, and they were extremely white and were never quite completely hidden by his lips. His middle and the space across his shoulders were beginning to accumulate the added poundage that comes to a man in his forties, but his body was not flabby; rather it was hard and muscular.

"Don't let me interrupt you," Rockwell answered quietly. "I'll be gone as soon as I can rustle up a bite to eat."

"I said you were interrupting."

The man's voice was neither loud nor quiet, but it carried authority with it; it carried the man's own conviction that he expected to be obeyed.

"You should speak to the proprietor, maybe he'd move the tables out of hearing distance of each other."

Tension mounted; the stoutish older man sat drumming on the tabletop with his thick, short fingers, showing his discomfort.

The proprietor, a blackish-haired man with marks of at least half Indian blood in him, and marks of dirt on him, brought two plates of fried meat and boiled potatoes in, set them down on the table the two men occupied, then returned through the door to the rear room without speaking.

THE BIG man took his foot off his chair and turned so that he was facing Rockwell squarely. His already square jaws seemed to become more square, and the blue of his eyes seemed to become milky. "Mister," he said, "I told you to flag it out of here. Don't you let me have to tell you again."

Rockwell raised his voice slightly so that it could be heard in the kitchen, and said, "Indian, bring me a dinner, and two cups of coffee." Then he dropped his voice back to normal. "Do you own this place? He let his eyes rest on the blond man.

"What's that to you?"

"If you don't, then you're running off at the mouth quite a bit for just another customer."

Rockwell's easy observation had a peculiar effect on the blond man. Instead of infuriating him, as Rockwell expected, it seemed to make the man curious; he gave Rockwell a new appraisal. "You seem to feel pretty sure of yourself," he observed thoughtfully after a long pause. "I wonder. Is this just an act, or have you got the guts you're trying to prove you have."

"There's one way you can find out," Rockwell assured him.

The big man shook his head. "You're all the same, you long-riders. Always afraid somebody is going to work you over, so you wear your quills straight up like a scared porcupine. These hills are full of your kind." He turned his back on Rockwell and sat down, then shouted, "All right, Injun, bring us a pot of coffee, and make it pronto."

Rockwell's meal came later. Before he was through with it, the blond man got up and jammed his hat on his head. He stood at his table, looked long at the oldish man who was still eating, and said, "You'll just be making trouble for yourself by hiring gun hands." He turned and threw a quick glance at Rockwell, then added, "And I wouldn't get the idea from this drifter's act that he could do you any good. They're all alike; they like to make you think they cut their teeth on a gun barrel, but you give them a whiff of gunsmoke and they'll tuck their tails between their legs and run for the hills. Don't let big talk fool you. And remember what I said about the other business; I'm not fooling around any longer."

Rockwell, still holding his knife and fork, said to the big one, "Friend when you start talking about a man, it might pay you to know what you're talking about."

The blue eyes glazed in the man's face, then took on a look of amusement. "Got your back up, eh? Well, you owlhooters are a dime a dozen in my book, and I say what I please about any man. I've got a broad back; see if you can hit it as I walk out."

The blond man turned his back on Rockwell and clumped out of the small room of the stage station; in another moment he passed the window, mounted on the big bay gelding that had been standing outside. The hoof-beats died down the mountain road.

The man with the bald spot on his head seemed to relax, as though he had been under a constant threat all the while. He found a cigar and lit it, and blew out a long puff of smoke.

"Your friend makes big words when he talks," Rockwell said; he had got the idea that the other man wanted him to speak first.

"Don't let the noise fool you; he's not all thunder."

"I didn't catch his name," Rockwell said.

"Dupree. John Dupree." The man settled down into his chair as though he were chronically tired. He studied his cigar a while, then turned his face to Rockwell. "You wouldn't happen to be looking for work, would you?"

"Rope or gun?"

The man shrugged. "You won't get rusty for the lack of either one," he answered. "I'd be able to use you, if you were looking for a job."

"I don't believe I caught your name?"

"McElroy. J. D. McElroy. I'm running cattle down in the flats."

"There's a town down there called Juniper?" Rockwell asked.

"Ten miles down this stage road. Not much of a place. How about that job?"

Rockwell got to his feet and took his hat off the antlers. "I'll let you know," he said. "I'll see you around."

McElroy gave him the impression of being harrassed; he seemed to be hiding some kind of disappointment. He seemed only a weary and worried old man, but somehow Rockwell gained the impression that behind the worried facade there was a shrewd and perhaps calculating brain.

McElroy looked at him behind

veiled eyes. "All right. All right. But don't fool yourself about Dupree, you might run into him. He's not all mouth."

"Thanks. I'll see you around," Rockwell answered, and threw a half dollar down on the table beside the empty plate.

"Yeah. Look me up sometime," the man threw after him. Rockwell got the notion that the man hated to give up the idea of hiring him. It was puzzling, but he dismissed it from his mind and went out and bridled his horse.

He set off down the mountain trail and reached Juniper a couple of hours before sundown.

THE TOWN was on a bench on the east side of the hill; the sun had already dropped behind the peaks, bringing a refreshing coolness to him and his sweated horse after the day in the stuffy, still air of the mountains. Trees ran down the sloping grade to within range of the town, then the hillside was bare as it sloped another quarter of a mile down to the rolling prairieland.

The trail out of the mountains made the only street of Juniper, along which sat two facing rows of faded weary buildings, none of which had ever known the touch of a painter's brush.

On down below this cluster of habitations and stores, the road wound between monster boulders, crossed a rocky stream, and set out straight across the unfenced grass.

Halting his horse a moment at a high point above the town, Rockwell looked out across the prairie and measured the worth of this land. In the heat-haze he could see a few clusters of scattered ranch buildings. The creek made a twisting dark line through the prairie, its waters hidden by bordering trees and scrub. Here and there clusters of transplanted creek willows and bois d'arc trees marked the points where ranchers had dammed up gullies and ravines to catch runoff rainwater, creating stock ponds.

There were few cattle to be seen near these ponds now, and Rockwell read the uncomfortable meaning of this sign—the ponds had dried up for lack of rainwater to compensate for their steady evaporation. That was never a good sign.

He rode on down between the rows of sulking buildings and came to a livery and feed stable and drove his horse into its doors, dismounting as a man got up off a barrel chair. "Let him blow a while before you water him again," he said. "Then feed him."

"Be around a while?" the man asked.

"Yeah, maybe. Feed him till I call for him."

The man patted the bay's sweaty side. He had only one eye, but Rockwell saw him read the brand with it, before asking, "Come far?" That was considerable curiosity for a man to show a stranger in these or any other parts.

"Yes," Rockwell answered. "Other side of the mountains." That was obvious, and left the man's curiosity unsatisfied, as Rockwell had intended it. "Where does a man get supper? And a room?"

"*John Brown's*. Next door past the *Traveler's*."

Rockwell unsaddled, threw his horse into a stall to cool off before the hostler watered him, then walked out to the front of the building and rolled a smoke while his eyes swept the dusty street.

The trails he had traveled were not easy ones; he had long since made it a practice to cultivate this matter of always looking ahead of him, of sizing up the terrain before him. He had developed a kind of sixth sense which enabled him to register the moods of places and of people. And he sensed a mood here in this hot and panting cluster of buildings lining a dusty street. This was a nervous place; this place was wound up like the spring of a clock.

But the trip was over, and suddenly Rockwell's body gave way to the letdown after his grueling ride. Long hot days in the saddle and short uncomfortable nights wherever sun-

down caught him had left his bones and muscles stiff, his body sapped of its juices, so that he felt like a dried-out weathered weed. Now he realized how stiff and tired and hungry and thirsty he was.

He started to move off toward *John Brown's,* but halted his steps at the sight of a horse and rider approaching. He dropped his cigarette and stood rolling another one as they approached. The horse was a high-stepping brown-and-white paint pony. The rider appeared to be a girl rather than a grown woman, and she sat in her saddle as though she had been born there.

She pulled into the stable without appearing to have seen him loitering just outside the door. After his own brief glimpse, he could have told you that she might have weighed a hundred and ten pounds; that she was dressed in tailored whipcord riding breeches, a white silk shirt, a tan Stetson hat; that her hair was red and her eyes green; that her skin was pale ivory and that her nose slightly upturned, just enough to destroy a too-perfect contour, and give her face the human touch. She rode with pride, that was the way he phrased it in his mind. She knew that she was a feast for the eyes of any man, and she seemed to take his gaze as her due—as a princess might.

He heard the little sounds as she dismounted inside the stable, heard low talk as she spoke to the attendant. Then as the two of them came back out of the place, he heard the hostler's final words. "I'll tell him, Miss Rhoda."

THE GIRL came out of the livery stable door, and for the first time seemed to note that Rockwell stood leaning against the outer wall, studying nothing in particular. He made a point of keeping his head turned away from her, but suddenly she was standing before him, weighing him carefully. He returned her look. There was a touch of arrogance in the way she looked at him, as she might study the points of a horse; it aroused an irritation in him, which caused him to keep his hat on his head.

"You just rode in?" Her voice was musical, but there was a touch of authoritativeness in it. More of the princess prerogative. It was not a question; it was a statement which she expected him to verify.

"Is that a fact?" he answered shortly.

Her ivory face colored with anger; she was on the verge of turning away, but she caught herself, some thought checking her. "I was told that you had just ridden in," she explained. "I thought perhaps you were looking for work; you'll pardon my intrusion, I'm sure."

"Sure." He was still piqued at her arrogance; he would not make it easy for her.

"Well, are you?" she asked, not quite concealing her impatience.

"Do you mean am I here, or do you mean am I looking for work?"

She bit her lip. "Are you trying to be smart, or are you looking for work."

"What kind of work. Rope or gun?"

As the man calling himself J. D. McElroy had done a few hours before, she glanced down at the well-worn black Colt hanging in its time-worn and oiled holster at his side. "You give the appearance of being able to do either," she said.

"I'm not without experience in either," he countered. "Which kind were you offering?"

"Both," she snapped. "And the pay is a hundred a month, if you're interested; if you're not, just say so."

Rockwell said dryly, "There seems to be lots of work of that kind around, right now. Maybe I'd better look around a while before I make up my mind. Thanks, just the same."

The girl looked up the street, as though she were going to walk out instead, she stood still, showing her indecision only by the impatient patting of the toe of her calfskin boot. Then she turned back to him. "Have you ever bossed a crew?"

"Gun crew?"

"Any kind of a crew."

"Yes."

"Then how would a hundred and twenty-five do? As foreman?"

"Mighty attractive offer. But I'll just hold off my decision if you can get along without me for the time."

Now she did not try to hide her disappointment. Rockwell saw that she was a woman who liked to have her own way, and resented being crossed. "Very well," she said. "If you decide you want a job, look me up. Rhoda Metcalf. My place is the Box M, ten miles down the left fork of the road."

She squared her shoulders and left him, walking down to a store and going inside. Rockwell saw that she was disappointed and angry with him for not having grabbed her offer; there was anger expressed in the way she walked.

He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and headed on down toward *John Brown's*. It was evident that Juniper was a place where a gun hand would not have much trouble finding work at his trade. This wide place in a mountain road had something going on under its sleepy exterior. It was like an apparently sleeping mountain lion.

2

THE LION STIRS

HE STOPPED off at a saloon called *The Traveler's* and went into the cool interior where he had a beer. The bartender set his glass in front of him and said, "Hot."

Rockwell agreed with him, draining his glass and taking another.

"Come far?"

A couple of men down at the end of the bar stopped their conversation to listen to the answer.

Rockwell shrugged off the question and went out and down to *John Brown's*. He noted a few more horses idling at the hitchracks, and saw a few riders ambling in from the mountain trail and from the prairie. He went into *Brown's*.

Brown's was a hotel. The lobby was about twenty feet square and had a door opening off to a dining room to the rear, and a stairway jammed against one wall. There were a few scattered chairs and a pine board desk in the lobby, and a few old calendars on the walls.

A fat man in his shirtsleeves and wearing a celluliod collar without a necktie, got up out of a rocking chair beside a spittoon and waddled over to the desk. He offered no greeting, but took an old gray notebook out of a shelf behind the desk and opened its dog-eared pages until he found a blank space. He threw a cedar pencil into the open book, and Rockwell registered. The man turned the book around, studied the name without comment, then said: "Number One. Front room on the left." He threw Rockwell a key.

Rockwell went up the rickety stairs to his room. He took his shirt off, poured water into a chipped china bowl and sponged off, shaking the dust out of his shirt, wetting his hair and combing it. He had faced so much sun recently that his skin was like a dry, thirsty sponge that soaked up the water. He went back downstairs and found a barbershop and got a shave and a haircut, and he felt a little better.

He went back to *Brown's* dining room and found an empty table near the open front door. Waiting for his meal he observed the half dozen people who were eating here. At the rear there was a man with prematurely white hair and a square reddish face who was having supper with a girl on whose face Rockwell's eyes could not help lingering.

Her hair was black and the profile view of her showed how straight her slender body was kept, how square her shoulders. She was wearing some kind of a cool-looking light green dress which seemed to float around her, but which did not succeed in hiding her curves. Her eyes were so dark that from his distance, Rockwell could not tell whether they

were blue or black.

While she was talking to the man with white hair, her eyes once came upon Rockwell, and held for a moent. She caught his glance and returned it with an interest that was not forward, but plainly frank. Then her eyes left him; nonetheless, Rockwell knew that she had at least been conscious of him.

Rockwell had just received his steak and potatoes when the front door opened and Rhoda Metcalf came in. She stood framed in the doorway a moment while she surveyed the dining room, then located a table and walked toward it. Rockwell saw her nod and smile briefly at the white-haired man, but the woman with him had her back to the Metcalf girl and apparently did not see her. He got the impression that Rhoda Metcalf's smile was no more than skin deep.

There was a young and good looking man with red hair sitting at the table to which Rhoda Metcalf went; she sat down across from him and they talked.

Rockwell continued his eating, giving his mind to the tensions and cross-currents which he suspected of being strong under the surface of things in this town. Twice while he was eating, he raised his head and saw the Metcalf girl studying him. The second time this happened, he did not avert his eyes, but returned her steady gaze.

She was not abashed; she continued to look at him in her impersonal and coolly willful manner. This woman, he knew, had a strength and individuality in her that set her apart from the average ranch girl. She was, he strongly suspected, a law and a power unto herself. He filed this away in his mind and gave his attention back to his meal.

He could not keep his eyes from the white-haired man and the girl with him. In her own way, this black-haired girl was as pretty as the other one; yet there was a world of difference between them, a difference he could not analyze. In a sparsely settled country, it would have been natural for two women acquaintences of about the same age to at least speak to each other when they met in town. Yet the girl with the elderly man had not even looked around when her companion nodded to Rhoda Metcalf. More undercurrent apparently.

THE WHITE-HAIRED man and the girl finished their meal and got up to leave. On the way out the girl passed by his table without again looking at him. The man dropped the pipe he was loading just as he came abreast of Rockwell's table. As he stooped to pick it up, he said in a voice which was low, but distinct: "The bridge below town after dark."

Then he was erect again and walking on. He caught up with the girl, opened the door for her, and they went out toward a horse and buggy tied at the hitchrail.

After he had finished his meal, Rockwell went out into the cool of the evening and sat down a few minutes on the front porch while he smoked. This was a Saturday evening; a few shoppers were pulling away from the big general store, their wagons loaded with sacks of flour and groceries. Riders were still drifting in, freshly shaved and wearing clean shirts.

And all of them wore their guns.

Rhoda Metcalf and the red-head came out of the dining room and separated. She passed him without recognition. Fat old John Brown came out and sat in the shade on a chair that had been reinforced with boards to hold his weight. A cool breeze rustled the scattered trees, sweeping down from the tops of the mountains. It grew darker.

Rockwell walked down the street to *The Rest*, a saloon across the street from the *The Traveler's*, and went in and had a beer. The place was cool and smelled pleasant with the odor of beer and cigar smoke; it hummed with the voices of a dozen or so men. There was a poker game at a table in the corner. One of the players was the red head.

Rockwell spoke to the bartender. "Open game?" he asked.

The bartender was a red faced man with three gold teeth and a dead cigar

in his mouth. He shouted across the room. "Hey, Bream. Man wants to know if that's an open game?"

"Tell him to come in if he can stand it," came the answer.

Rockwell went over and sat at the table. The man named Bream wore a marshal's badge. He was tall and slender; his hands were delicate and had no evidence of having been used for work. His face was narrow and his eyes were set very close together over a nose that was thin, blue-veined and razor sharp. The eyes could have been either slate gray or black—it was hard to tell—and they had a kind of somnolent look, like those of a fish not long dead. Rockwell got the impression that the dead expression of the eyes were a cultivated thing, a curtain between his thoughts and the outer world.

"How steep?" Rockwell asked.

"Stud. Hundred dollar change-in, and no limit on the bets. Table stakes."

Rockwell opened a wallet and dug out five twenty dollar gold pieces. Then as a second thought, he stacked another five on top of the first ones. "Suits me," he said.

They played a few hands of stud with Rockwell just about breaking even. He did not have his mind on the game; he was wondering what type of crossroads marshal could afford to play a game in which the bets sometimes went to fifty dollars on a single card. Bream had a stack of gold, silver and bills in front of him that probably added up to two or three thousand dollars. The red-headed puncher had several hundred dollars in front of him, and a couple of other men had substantial stakes.

They had played three or four hands when Bream said, "New around here."

Rockwell said, "Yes," and bet twenty dollars on an ace which was dealt him.

"Your face looks familiar. Been around here before?"

"First visit," Rockwell answered, and bet fifty dollars on a jack which paired his hole card. Then he added after he had made his bet. "Maybe you saw me down in Texas."

"I never was down in Texas," Bream answered.

"Then it must have been a couple of other fellows that met somewhere else," Rockwell answered. He bet a hundred dollars on the second jack which was in sight, and only the red-headed man stayed with him. Bream apparently did not think his joke was funny.

Bream shuffled the deck idly, and did not give up. "Still, I know your face. I've seen you somewhere. I never forget a face; what'd you say your name was?"

"I'm not sure I could remember it, myself," Rockwell answered. "Most of 'em just call me Brazos and let it go at that."

Rockwell won the pot from Red and raked in close to five hundred dollars. Bream lost heavily to a fat puncher trying to make a flush on the next hand, then gathered up his money. "I just remembered; I've got to see a man," he said, and left the game.

The young red-headed puncher also got up, pocketing the few gold pieces left in front of him. "I've had enough for tonight," he said and smiled at Rockwell. "But stick around; I'll be back to dynamite my money out of you the next game."

"It's waiting for you," Rockwell promised him.

THIS BROKE up the game, and Rockwell went back to the bar with the extra money in his pocket. Red stopped for a drink with him, then went out. Rockwell finished his beer and went out onto the street. It was dark now, and he strolled down the board sidewalk at a lazily indifferent gait, noting the quick look that men gave him in passing.

He passed the livery stable, the last of the buildings that had lighted their lamps, then quickened his pace and walked rapidly down the road to the boulder-strewn creek. He crossed the plank bridge and turned off the road, walking up the creek bank. He found a flat stone behind a large boulder and sat down, completely hidden in the darkness.

Apparently the white-haired man

had been waiting for him. Rockwell had hardly seated himself when he heard the voice: "Got here all right, Rockwell?" The man materialized out of the deeper blackness and sat down beside him. The other blew out a long breath. "Glad you was able to make it so soon."

"Got here as quick as I could. Slow riding in this heat. How's it going?"

"Whole coutry is wound up tighter'n a clock spring. Something's gonna bust wide open any minute, and when it does, there's going to be a lot of burying."

"Maybe you'd better tell me how it's lined up; I didn't get much of it from Morphy."

Rockwell, in fact, knew very little of the situation here at Juniper. Ed Bryant had come to the Cattlemen's Association office in Fort Worth, making a personal trip to tell his story for fear that a letter would be intercepted. There he had told his story to Morphy, the chief, and to Rockwell, the association's star operative. Rockwell had then had to go down into South Texas on another matter before the conference with Bryant was finished. While he was gone, Morphy had been shot and killed, leaving Rockwell with no knowledge of Bryant's further conversations with him.

"Well," Bryant said, "this is how it stacks up, and this is what Morphy and me had planned. There's a big piece of this prairie that was ranched by a man name of Bob Metcalf. Bob was a two-fisted humdinger from away back, and he could hold any piece of land he wanted. The only way they ever licked him was to shoot him in the back with a deer rifle, so they done that. His girl kind of took after him; thinks she's the Queen bee or something. That was her in the restaurant. Well, she's trying to run his holdings, but she just ain't man enough."

"Metcalf's land lies along the foot of the mountains, and the mountains are as thick with longloopers as a dog is with fleas. Old Metcalf kept them under control by the free use of new rope and sycamore limbs, along with generous doses of black powder and lead; but now that they've killed him, the boys are coming down out of the hills and helping theirselves to anything wearing four legs and a brand. Nobody can't stop 'em. Riding over Rhoda's land, of course, which they were afraid to do while Bob Metcalf was alive. We've set traps, and the traps get sprung empty. We've done everything, and we can't stop 'em. They know every move we're going to make before we make it, and they just laugh at us."

"How about your local law?"

"Willy Bream? That's the boy to figger. Ain't nobody caught him at anything, but we don't see how he can do so well for himself, catch as few cattle thieves as he does, hang out with every crook in the mountains that has an itch to play a little poker, and still be an honest man."

"Then how come you keep him on the job?"

"A man by the name of John Dupree. Dupree has got land both on the flats and in the mountains. He's had an itch to wear Metcalf's breeches, but they're just a shade too big for him. However, he don't give up, and he's a man goes after what he wants. Dupree has got enough power around here to keep Bream in office, so he does."

"How about Dupree himself? Could he be longlooping?"

THE OTHER paused for a moment. "He may know the smell of powder, and his hands might fit a long loop; but right at present he's got big holdings, and I can't figure him doing any of the actual thievery. You know, there ain't a man in the world more against stealing than a thief that's got all he wants for himself. But this much is pretty sure; his land lies alongside the Metcalf place, and he would be a bigger fool than I take him for if he didn't want to annex both the Metcalf land and the Metcalf girl. The land would give him more power and the girl would give him social position, which he hasn't got around here. Decent people don't take to him."

"There's a man named McElroy

around. Who's he?"

"A medium-sized rancher down on the flats. He's Rhoda Metcalf's uncle. He should be helping her hold stock, but he's old, and not too energetic, anyway. All he wants is a tree to sit under."

"And a red-head by the name of Coulter?"

"You seem to be getting acquainted pretty fast," Bryant said. "Red Coulter works for Rhoda Metcalf. He is sometimes seen with Dupree. That was him eating with Rhoda."

"What else about him?"

"That's all. He plays a lot of high-priced poker. The average rider can't afford much of that."

"Who can I trust in town to get a message to you whenever I need to see you?"

"A man doesn't know who his friends are any more," Bryant said sadly. "If you bump into a rancher name Marvin Lucas, he lives next ranch to mine and he could bring me a message. Otherwise, it'd be safer to come to my place direct, if it was convenient. I'm six miles out on the right fork. You got any plans?"

"This is a thing we've done before under similar circumstances," Rockwell explained. "I've taken steps to try to work my way into the middle of where things are hottest. It might work and it might not. So, if you happen to see me in bad company, don't shoot; just figure I'm working, and I'll be getting in touch with you at the proper time. A thing like this, you've got to just make your plans as things come up. Anyway, you can let your friends—those you're sure of—know that you've got help; that's about all I can tell you for now."

Bryant got to his feet. "Well, good luck, and if you need help, get me word. There's a few of us around here that's still able to do something."

Rockwell promised, and then Bryant added, "You won't be meeting too many friends, I take it, so drop by the ranch for a bite and a visit whenever you can spare the time. My daughter can make a skillet do tricks."

"I'll be glad to check on that statement," Rockwell promised him heartily.

* * *

Rockwell left Bryant and walked back to town. He headed for *The Traveler's*, and as he entered the place, Willy Bream, the marshal, turned from the bar, then drew his eyes on him. The officer stepped over and joined him at the end of the bar. "I was looking for you," he said. "Wanted to have a little talk."

"What about?" Rockwell asked.

Bream took a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it and laid it on the bar before Rockwell. "About a piece of mail I got recently. Ever see that before?"

Rockwell drained his drink and then let his eyes go to the paper. It was a regular sheriff's dodger, and it had Rockwell's picture on it. It read:

WANTED: DEAD OR ALIVE!

Jim Rockwell, alias "Brazos!"

The Sheriff of Cactus County, Texas, will pay $500.00 Reward for the arrest and detention of the above-pictured stage-robber and murderer. This man is dangerous; approach with caution. Description, Height 6 Ft. Wt., about 190, complexion ruddy, hair med. brown. Eyes, dark blue. Age, about 30.
Marks, small white scar on bridge of nose, 2 in. scar from point of right chin to neck. Communicate with J. Hogan, Sheriff, Cactus, Tex.

3

THE NIGHT HAS EYES

BREAM'S voice was low but insistent. "Well, did you ever see that before?"

"No. Can't say that I have," Rockwell answered. "But I'm not much of a one to do any reading, outside of the newspapers. Why?"

"I want to know what you're doing around here, Rockwell?"

"My doctor said mountain air might improve my health. My appetite hasn't been good lately."

Bream said, "Oh, you're one of those smart boys, are you?"

"I can take care of myself."

"You don't seem to be doing any too good a job of it," Bream pointed out. "You registered at *John Brown's* under your right name, and you admitted to being called Brazos. With your picture posted all over the Territory, that don't seem like you're much interested in your health. Anyhow, let's take a walk down to my office and talk it over."

"Let's stay here and talk it over," Rockwell answered. "I like the atmosphere here."

"I'm talking reasonable to you," Bream said quietly. "Don't make me have to get rough."

"I still like it here."

Bream spun a gold-eagle on the bar while he thought this over. Then he asked, "Are you figuring on resisting arrest?"

Rockwell countered, "Are you figuring on arresting me?"

Bream said, "A town marshal don't make any too much money. Five hundred dollars will buy a lot of oats."

"I see," Rockwell answered. "You just don't want to lose that scalp-money by letting me stick around."

"It's not that exactly," Bream answered reasonably. "The fact is, up here we don't like them Texas sheriffs any too much, anyway; they ride too high a horse for our liking. But facts is facts."

"And the facts that interest you," Rockwell said, "are those pots I won in that stud game. You figured I just about earned your reward money."

Bream shrugged. "Figure it this way; you won about that much in a few minutes. It ought to be worth a few minutes poker playing for you not to have to worry about sweating in that little old hot tin jail of ours."

"I reckon my not sweating in jail is worth a whole lot," Rockwell answered. "But I wasn't figuring on sleeping there; I'd rather sleep in *Brown's* hard bed, and that's saying a great deal."

Bream shrugged. "Well, suit yourself. It's your choice."

Rockwell deliberated a moment, then answered, "Then I choose to stay at the hotel, and I choose not to give you that five hundred dollars. And I might add another word; I don't think much of scalp hunters."

This talk had been going on down at the end of the bar. Rockwell had weighed his chances and had thought them fair enough to take the risk. There were only four men scattered along the bar, and it was evident that they were pretty far along with their drinking. He could discount them, even if they were friends of Willy Bream. As to Bream himself, he wore his gun on a tight cartridge belt high around his middle; he could never draw fast enough to be a menace.

Rockwell had thrown down his challenge to Bream. Now he waited easily while Bream thought it over. He was not making it easy for the marshal, but he was learning things he wanted to know.

Bream seemed to be buried in thought. He had both hands on his beer glass; he stood facing the bar with one foot up on the rail, and both elbows on the bar as he gazed thoughtfully into his drink. He took his left hand off his beer glass, lifted his hat with it and scratched his head, then put his hand back on his beer glass.

"Well," he said without raising his eyes, "Looky here—"

It was then that Rockwell felt a hard something in the middle of his back, and recognized the voice of Red Coulter behind him. Red always had a kind of laugh in his voice. "Just leave your hands on your drink," he said. "Sorry to bother you." Then, "All right, Willy, he's yours."

Bream's act of scratching his head had been a signal, and Rockwell had failed to note it.

THE MARSHAL moved now. He took Rockwell's gun out of its holster and patted down his pockets

looking for a Derringer. Satisfied, he said. "All right, Rockwell. Now we'll step down to my office and have that talk."

Rockwell grinned. "Okay, Bream. It's your trick. Or Red's. Have a beer, Red, before we go." He reached into his pocket and threw a coin on the bar.

Red stepped around from behind and slid up to the bar to Rockwell's left, keeping his gun in his hand which hung below the level of the end of the bar, so that it was not visible to the other four customers. He was still wearing the grin which never left his face. "No hard feelings," he said to Rockwell as the bartender brought his beer. He lifted the glass with his left hand and put it to his lips.

"None at all, Red," Rockwell answered—and swung with his fist at the same time.

His blow caught Red on the point of the jaw, just as Red had his head tilted upward and his glass half emptied. It knocked Red five feet across the floor and left him with his head against a spittoon which he overturned. The gun fell out of his hand; he rolled over and got to his hands and knees, shook his head as though to rid it of cobwebs.

But now Bream had his own gun out, and Rockwell was unarmed. Bream said in a low, complaining voice, "I should shoot you dead. Now behave yourself."

"Why don't you?" Rockwell returned. "You've got the odds you seem to like."

Bream's face turned to the color of putty, but he held back any retort.

Red Coulter got to his feet and picked up his gun. Seeing that Bream had Rockwell covered, he sat down at the empty poker table and ordered a beer, keeping his eyes off Rockwell. The bartender brought him a glass and he drained it at one gulp. Then he took the glass and threw it against the wall with all the force he could muster, shattering it into a thousands shards.

Rockwell grinned at him. "You've got a real devil inside you, Red; better keep it under control."

Bream said, "Now are you coming with me, or are you going to resist arrest again? Just make it light on yourself."

Rockwell saw that he had ragged Bream to the end of his thin veneer of patience. "All right; I'll try your bed. But it had better be softer than that one at *Brown's*, or I won't stay with you."

He turned and went out with the marshal. Rockwell had forced himself to continue his casual banter, but that was for the purpose of hiding his own disgust with himself. He had walked into a trap, and that carelessness could have disastrous effects.

He had not counted on Bream being quick-witted enough to set a trap for him this soon. It became clear to him that this was a smarter bunch than he had expected to find.

It was dark on the street now, and night noises came out of open doors. The stores and saloons threw yellow squares of light out of their windows, so that Rockwell and the marshal walked in and out of yellow patches of alternate light and darkness. A cooling breeze poured down out of the mountains now, giving relief from the day's heat, giving a man a chance to get some of his strength back. Men's boots clumped up and down the board walkways on both sides of the dusty street.

THREE SHADOWS suddenly emerged from a darkened doorway and blocked the sidewalk. "Where are you going with this gent?" one of them asked.

"What's it to you?" Bream snapped.

"We want a talk with him."

"Come down to the jail tomorrow and maybe I'll let you see him—if you've got any business talking to him. Better get on down the street, Mack."

Apparently Bream knew the men. One of them spoke to Rockwell. "Where are you from, bud?"

"What's that to you?" Rockwell answered.

"It might be important," the man answered. "We like to know who's around."

"Who likes to know who's

around?" Rockwell returned; he wanted a lead as to who these men were.

"Say *I* do. That'll be enough."

"Not for me."

The man said, "Bream, we'll take responsibility for him; you can trot along."

"You'll be taking a big responsibility," Bream said, uncertainly. Bream had counted the odds against him, but he was not giving up his prisoner without an effort. "I've got a hold order on this man, and you'll be interfering with the law if you take him out of my hands. You know what it means, helping an outlaw escape?"

"You can just put it down as the playful antics of Hairpin and Fat Stuff, Bream. Walk on up the street."

Bream gave the speaker one more word of caution. "You've got the drop on me now, but this bright idea of yours ain't going to pay off for you in the long run."

Rockwell made out the figures of the three men now; the speaker whom Bream had called Mack was just of ordinary size. One of his companions was extraordinarily tall and slender, and the other one short and fat. Hairpin and Fat Stuff, apparently. The fat one spoke: "Are you going to move under your own power, Willy, or do we have to move you?"

Bream did not get excited. As before, his voice was low and slightly whining. "All right, men. You boys take this trick. But don't fool yourselves; it's going to cost you."

Bream started to turn around. Rockwell took advantage of his movement, and threw his arm around the marshal's neck. "Just a minute, friend," he said, and retrieved his gun from Bream's waist. "I wouldn't want you to misplace this little keepsake of mine."

He turned the marshal loose and gave him a shove. Then he stood holding his gun while the marshal headed back toward the saloon, walking as casually as he had done everything else. Nothing seemed to affect the outward appearance of this queer town law officer.

Rockwell did not holster his gun but kept it in his hand hanging at his side as he turned to the three men who had got him away from Bream. "Thanks, gents," he said. "I didn't like the prospects of spending the night in jail. But, there's a lot of things I don't like."

"Such as?" The question came in a sad voice from the lean man.

"Such as having to answer a lot of questions about myself. This town is full of plumb curious folks that want to know all about a man."

Mack laughed. "Aw, we know all we want to know about you. That was just an excuse we was making to Willy."

"Then maybe I can get in a question for a change, instead of answering 'em." Rockwell said. "What's the idea of prying me loose from the man?"

"Well, now," Mack said. "It's just an idea somebody had. Put it this way; it's a Saturday night, and a fellow likes to hang around town free and easy on Saturday night. We thought maybe you'd feel that way about it, so we saved you a night in the lockup. Ain't that enough reason?"

Rockwell knew that he would not get a straight answer to this puzzle, so he gave up.

"You gents are right sensitive to a man's feelings," he said. "How about a drink on it?"

"It's all right if you don't make the mistake of trying to drink at *The Traveler's*. There's germs in the air at that place—it's contaminated."

"I thought I smelled something in there," Rockwell answered dryly.

"That was the odor of John Dupree," the fat one of the trio said. "With the wind in the right direction, you smell him a mile."

THE THREE went back to *The Rest* with Rockwell and had a couple of rounds of beers. Rockwell tried to pump them, but they would

not pump. They had a facetious answer for every one of his carefully-worded hints, and he got exactly nowhere.

He did get to study these men in the light of the saloon, though, and he still could not quite make them out. The man Bream had called Mack was just that, a man named Mack. He was about forty, had the markings of a man who had spent his days in the sun, big, work-hardened hands, crow's feet around his eyes and faded eyebrows.

Hairpin and Fat Stuff were the types that made a "pair." Hairpin was over-tall, sad-eyed, and wore a droopy mustache, while his partner was short and heavy, with a round face and guileless blue eyes. But "Fat Stuff" was a misnomer, Rockwell judged. That weight on him was not suet; it was muscle.

Mack said, "Well, watch yourself, friend. We've got to run along."

The three turned and went out, and it struck Rockwell as curious that they had not in turn tried to pump him. It was evident that they had been acting for some purpose, and that they knew something about him, at least.

Just as the batwing doors flopped together behind the three strange men, Rockwell heard the crash of gunfire. It seemed to be coming from the direction of *The Traveler's*, across the street.

He felt sadness come over him. It looked as though Willy bream was already making their rescue cost them.

4

ROCKWELL TAKES A JOB

IN ANSWERING volley of shots came from directly outside the saloon door, then more from across the street. A front window of the saloon suddenly exploded, sending shards of broken glass across the room. The bartender slapped out one of his oil lights with a quick gesture, then jerked the chain that let the ceiling lamp down. He slapped his hand over that light, extinguishing it and leaving the room in darkness.

Rockwell had given a quick glance around the room. Now, as darkness flooded it, he pushed his way through scuffling men and reached a side window. He tried to open it, but it was nailed down; he jerked his pistol and beat the glass out of it with the butt of the gun, crawled through it into the ouside darkness.

He was out in a side passageway between the saloon and another building, a space some two feet wide. He followed this toward the street, bumping his shins on old boxes and cans. As he reached the front corner of the saloon he halted there.

Rockwell saw how it was when he located a flash of muzzle flame spouting from the dark alley that ran alongside *The Traveler's* across the street. Another gun registered its flash from a window above *The Traveler's*. A third one came from another passageway like his own, but a hundred feet away on the other side of the street. These ambushers had Mack and his partners pinned down in the inset entrance of *The Rest*; the boys were returning their fire, but they were in an exposed spot.

Rockwell kept his eyes pinned on the dark alley across the street from himself. When the next flash came from the alleyway, Rockwell fired quickly, once to the right and once to the left of the muzzle flame. A man howled in the alley—but he did not return the shots.

Rockwell gave his attention to the second floor window over *The Traveler's*. He saw a form appear at the window, saw the muzzle of a rifle come to rest on the window sill—then he fired.

The ambusher's rifle fell out of the window, hit the wooden awning over the sidewalk, and rolled down it and dropped to the dust of the street. A man's head bowed out of at the window sill, but his hand gave way, and he fell head first onto the

awning over the sidewalk. He rolled the rest of the way and thudded to the ground. As he lay on his side, his feet kicked with a motion as though he were running—then they quit kicking, and the man rolled over on his back and lay still.

There was a quick blast of shots from in front of *The Rest*, which seemed to drive away the man hidden in the passageway up the street, for now a sudden quiet settled on the street. Rockwell looked up the street and down the street, and saw nobody—saw no movement at all—except the wild, excited prancing of a saddle horse which had panicked at the noise and broken his tie rope. The horse ran up the street, saddle empty and reins dragging the ground.

Rockwell reloaded his gun and dropped it into his holster, then stepped out from between the buildings and walked to the door of *The Rest*. His three friends stood there in a group, cursing and reloading. "Thought you rannies had gone home."

"No," the tall, sad one answered, "We figured it was too nice a night to go home so early. Time for one more round, anyway. Have one with us?"

"I think I'll pass this one up," Rockwell answered. "It has just occurred to me that I've got to see a party about a job."

"Rope or gun?" the fat one asked.

"I might be able to hold either one," Rockwell answered.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Fat Stuff said. "I wonder who shot that hombre out of *The Traveler's* window?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Rockwell answered. "Why don't you ask him?"

"He's dead; I'd have to go to—"

"Right," Rockwell answered. "I'll see you around."

ROCKWELL walked on down to the livery stable and had a look at his horse. He also had another look, the purpose for which he had come. He saw a paint horse in another stall, and the hand-stamped lady's saddle hanging from a peg. He turned back, but the one-eyed holster stopped him. "Get onto a job yet?"

"I haven't had time to look for work up to now," he answered. "Why? You know of any work?"

"According to what kind you're looking for," the man answered mysteriously. "Now if the well-worn look of that gun of yours means anything, I could send you to a man who might know somebody that might be able to put you onto a job."

"That sounds just a little roundabout to me," Rockwell answered gracely. "But who do I see to start this round robin?"

"Well, I don't know nothing, myself. But I heard somebody tell another man that if he knew anybody looking for gun wages, he was to get in touch with John Dupree, who might know of somebody—"

"Yeah, somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody—"

The one-eyed man shrugged. "Me, I don't know nothing. See Dupree if you want to. If you don't, then don't; I was just trying to do you a good turn."

Rockwell said, "Thanks," and went out and walked up to the hotel.

The fat man was sitting in his reinforced chair in the lobby, reading a month-old Kansas City Stockman. Rockwell dropped into a chair beside him. "How are you, Oscar?" he asked. "Haven't seen you in a long time."

"Why the hell can't you let a man alone?" the fat man growled, "you're worse'n a ha'nt."

"I'm not following you, Oscar. You paid your debt to Texas for smuggling that stolen herd down into Mexico. The only thing I ever held against you personally was that I couldn't find the money you got for it."

"You still can't find it," the fat man answered. "I ain't got it; I told you that."

"You had it hid, and when you got out you went and got it, and came up here wearing a new name, and bought this hotel with it. That's my guess, but I'm not interested, Oscar;

I've got enough to keep me busy. How about a deal?"

"I don't have to make no deals with the law. I've paid—"

"I know. But there's a lot of cattle evaporating around here, just like there were where I saw you last. People are always putting two and two together—"

"But they don't unless they've got the figures," the fat man answered, "so they couldn't be adding me up unless you gave them my number."

"Right. And like I said, I haven't got any business with you—so far as I know now. The rest of the people here don't know what my business is. They haven't got my number—nor yours."

"You're just wasting time talking," the fat man puffed. "Like I said, I've got me this little business, and I want to keep it. Me, I don't know nothing about nobody."

"Even about me?"

"I didn't recognize you when you first came in, did I? I never saw you in my life before."

"Fair enough," Rockwell promised. "And now where can I find Miss Metcalf?"

"Starting to pump me already," John Brown growled.

"I'm not asking you where the body is buried; I'm just asking about a lady that's stopping at this hotel for some reason that beats me when I smell the place."

"She's upstairs in the parlor—and if you don't like the smell of the place, go sleep under a tree."

ROCKWELL took the rickety stairs to the second floor and went to the rear where there was an open door with a sign marked *Ladies Parlor* painted over it with an amateur's brush. The room was lighted, and he stepped in.

Rhoda Metcalf sat in a rocking chair in the dingy room, talking to a man. The man who looked up scowlingly at Rockwell was John Dupree.

Jim Rockwell took off his hat—with his left hand, leaving his right hanging by his gun. Then the parlor settled down into a very tight and uncomfortable silence as the two men looked at each other.

Dupree was in a chair drawn up very close to and facing Rhoda Metcalf; Rockwell gathered that he was interrupting a very private conversation, as he had interrupted Dupree earlier in the day. "Am I interrupting again?" Rockwell's face was straight, but there was a suggestion of a taunting smile around the corners of his lips.

Dupree got to his feet, red faced. "Yes, you're interrupting again," he snapped. "This is a private room; get out!"

Rockwell answered soothingly. "Its a public room, Dupree."

"Well, what do you want in it?"

"I didn't come to see you; I came to see Miss Metcalf."

The girl had sat back with a graven face, taking in this tense air between the two men; now she looked at Rockwell inquiringly. "What did you want to see me about?" she asked.

"It is a private matter, if you don't mind."

Dupree spoke. "He's another one of those long-riders trying to lose himself in the mountains. Probably wants to tie on to somebody's payroll for whiskey money. They won't do, Rhoda; you don't need men of that stripe."

Rockwell's voice was calm; it was cold, and it carried a menace. "I've told you before Dupree, that you talk when you should be listening; you're old enough to know better than that."

"Maybe you can teach me better."

"There's time, Dupree—plenty of time."

Rhoda Metcalf said sharply, "You men stop that." She turned to Dupree. "I'll think about what you said; and now, if you'll excuse us I'll see what this man wants."

Dupree started to say something, but she stood up, and a firmness came over her face. Dupree saw his dismissal, closed his mouth and picked up his hat. He went as far as the door, then turned and looked coldly at Rockwell. "You'd better get

out of the country," he said. "And be quick about it."

"Else what?" Rockwell asked gently.

"Or else the next time I see you, I'm going to give myself the pleasure of tearing you into small pieces and throwing you to the dogs, bit by bit."

"That's a cute idea," Rockwell grinned at him. "But I bet ten dollars you forget all about it the next time you see me."

"Save your money," Dupree snapped; "you'll need it for the undertaker."

The big blond man stamped down the hall and down the stairs.

RHODA METCALF sat down and indicated a chair for Rockwell. "Smoke, if you want to," she said. Rockwell sat down and got out the makings. "Now, what did you want to see me about? Have you reconsidered about going to work for me?"

"In a way, yes,—that is—now that I've heard the gossip around here, it strikes me that this might be an interesting place for a while. I'll do this much for you; I'll come out and be of such help as I can, but I don't want a regular job. I'd rather be in a position to go and come as I please."

The girl gave this some thought. "That makes it rather difficult," she said. "I operate my ranch; naturally I expect my men to be where I want them, and do what I want done when I need them."

"I was afraid that would be the case," Rockwell answered picking his hat up off the floor and getting to his feet. "Well, I'm sorry I took up your time."

"Wait," the girl said. "What's this trouble between you and John Dupree?"

Rockwell gave her a blank look. "What's the trouble between *you* and him?"

The girl colored. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't intend to get personal; but you must understand that conditions here are not very stable right now. I'm in difficulties, and naturally I am concerned—"

"Naturally," Rockwell answered. "That's why I thought I might be able to help you. But let it go."

The girl bit her lips, unable to hide her displeasure at this man, who was so much more difficult to to handle than any man she had ever met before. "Don't be in a hurry. You could be of some help, if you would be reasonable."

"I take it that being reasonable means taking orders from you," Rockwell said quietly. "I've been my own boss so long that I might find that difficult; we'd better drop the matter."

There were footsteps on the stairs, and a knock on the parlor door frame. At the girl's call, a young tow-headed man in boots and work levis came in with his hat in his hand. His face and the back of his shirt were sweated. "There's a bunch of men took over the Willow Creek line camp," he announced excitedly. "Me and Sandy stopped off there a while ago, and they opened up with guns; they killed Sandy."

The girl made an impatient noise and tapped her foot. "Who are they?"

"I didn't see the brands on their horses, and I didn't see any on the men. They was inside the cabin, and they shot at us through the windows. I couldn't stop to pick up Sandy, but he was dead when he hit the ground. It's mountain men done it, I reckon."

"Yes," the woman said thoughtfully. Then she looked at Rockwell. "You said you could handle a crew. Well, somebody has killed one of my men, and they'll sweep my Willow Creek range clean of stock if they're not routed. Can you take a bunch of men and drive them out?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Rockwell answered.

"Then do it. Do it your own way." She turned to the youth. "Cotton, go find Mack and Red and round up the boys and head for home. We'll be there before you."

When the youth went hurrying importantly back down the stairs, the woman turned to Rockwell. "You've got a job. What is your name?"

"Yes, I've got a job. My name is Jim Rockwell. And this Mack you mentioned, does he work for you?"

"Yes."

"Would you by any chance have put him on my trail tonight?"

The girl looked away. "Yes," she answered without meeting his gaze.

"Why?"

For a moment, the girl seemed at a loss for words. She was deep in thought for a moment; then she looked at him, and for the first time since he had known her, there was in her look something resembling personal interest. She was regarding him as a woman regards a man, and there was a woman's faint smile at the corners of her mouth. "Do you always ask women why they do things?" she countered evasively. She turned toward the door. "We'd better hurry. It's a ten mile ride to the ranch."

5

TRAITOR IN THE RANKS

ROCKWELL did not have time to see much of Box M when he rode up, but in the moonlight he could see that there were many substantial buildings which sat square on their foundations; and he knew that this was a place such as old Bob Metcalf would have taken pride in.

When he dismounted there were a few men already sitting around to front of the bunkhouse. He said to the girl who dismounted with him. "I'll need a fresh horse."

She called a man named Joe and turned their horses over to him. "This is Jim Rockwell," she said briefly. "He'll need a fresh horse right away; a good one. And after this, get him whatever he asks for."

The man led the horses away and Rockwell and the girl went to the bunkhouse; they entered and the bunch went in with them. Her face was grave in the light of the lamp somebody lit. She waited until they were all settled around the long table. "I suppose you've heard it already. The mountain men have moved against us, and they have taken over Willow Creek line camp. If they get settled in here, we'll never get them out."

She turned to Rockwell, "How many men will you need?"

There were eight men in the room, and a brief glance at them told Rockwell that few of them had the earmarks of fighters. "It won't hurt to take 'em all," he said; "the more we have, the better."

The girl looked around, then spoke to the group. "This is Jim Rockwell. He has had experience in this kind of thing. He will take charge, and you will take orders from him. Just remember, those people are making a move to take my home away from me; to take our home away from us. We don't want them to do it."

She turned back to Rockwell, "All right, Jim."

The girl sat down. Rockwell was at the head of the table, and he stood up. He was silent a moment, knowing that the men were sizing him up, forming their judgments of him, waiting to see him in action. The girl had spoken to them quietly and with restraint, but at the same time he noted a subdued tensity about her. Her little talk sounded to him like a general making a talk to a bunch of men going into battle and reminding them of their homes and beloved ones, for whom they were fighting. It sounded a little theatrical to Rockwell, and he wondered if they felt the same way about it. He suspected that they did, and he also suspected that they were waiting for

him to make the same kind of speech.

He looked over the crowd and his eyes came to rest on Hairpin and Fat Stuff who sat at the far end of the table. He had a half smile on his face when he spoke to them. "You boys get around, don't you?"

Hairpin said, "Aw, there wasn't nothing goin' on in town, so we came home."

Red Coulter was sitting on a box by the cookstove, rolling a cigarette. Rockwell gave him a quick grin, and asked, "You coming along?"

Red answered, "I work here don't I?"

Rockwell grinned at him and let it go at that. Then he turned to the bunch in general. "This job might be a little rough, boys; get yourself plenty of shells and let's go and get it over."

That was all he said; he got up and walked out of the bunkhouse, found the man with his saddle on a fresh horse. He took the reins and waited for the men to pile out of the bunkhouse. He had given them no opportunity to argue his orders.

THE MEN were busy digging guns and cartridge belts out of their gear by their bunks. Rhoda came out of the bunkhouse and stopped to talk to Rockwell. "You thought I sounded dramatic in there, didn't you?"

"I don't remember what I thought."

"That's what you thought; I could see in on your face."

He did not answer that one, and she continued. "I've *got* to keep this place. This is my home, and it is the only thing in the world that I have to live for; I couldn't stand to see myself driven off of it."

"You ought to have enough friends to help you hold it," Rockwell answered.

"Friends," she repeated scornfully. "Who are my friends? Nobody knows who his friends are on this range; it's every man for himself. I've got to fight, but how can I fight when I can't get men to help me?"

"What's the matter with Dupree? He's a big man; I imagine he would be glad to help you."

She looked at him sharply in the moonlight. "You've been hearing things. Sure, Dupree would help me —at a price."

"Maybe it would be worth a price."

"Not his price. I'd rather lose the ranch fighting than to marry him and save it, only to have him take it over." She was laboring under a strong emotion, but she got control of herself and said sharply, "Why did you ask that?"

"I just wanted to know how things stood between you and him."

"That sounds personal, to me."

"I don't care a thing about your personal affairs, but if I end up having to fight Dupree, I don't want to find out that you're standing between us."

"I'm not standing between you and Dupree and I never will," the girl said vehemently.

The men were pouring out of the bunkhouse now, making for the corral, where they caught up their horses. Presently the whole group was mounted. Rockwell said, "Let's go."

As they rode through the darkness with Mack Farley and Rockwell in the lead, Red Coulter pulled up beside Rockwell. "About that little to-do in *The Traveler's* tonight. No hard feelings, I hope."

Rockwell thought wryly of how nearly he had fallen into Willy Bream's trap. "No," he said, "nothing like that. It was my own fault; I picked the wrong deadfall."

"Bream ain't a bad hombre when you get to know him," Coulter said. "He just wanted to know what you were doing around here. You got squared up with him all right, I guess."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you ain't in jail."

Evidently Red had not heard about the things that had happened later. Since the shooting could have been heard all over town, Red must have left town immediately after Bream started out of the saloon with Rockwell. It would be interesting to know where Red had gone, and how he came to eventually be back at the

ranch with the rest of the boys if he hadn't been in town to get the word.

"No," Rockwell admitted, "I'm not in jail."

"And if you ain't in jail, then it's because Willy don't want you there; otherwise, that's where you'd be."

"Willy must be somewhat of a gent," Rockwell answered.

"Willy *is* somewhat of a gent," Red Coulter answered firmly, "and you'll learn that for sure if you stick around."

PRESENTLY Rockwell found himself riding between Hairpin and Fat Stuff. The heavy man cut off a chew of tobacco and stuffed it into his mouth, then made the observation, "So you're from Texas. What part?"

"Oh, all around," Rockwell answered. "Why?"

"Things's been puzzling me a long time that maybe you could answer. Ever hear of Lost Valley?"

"I've bumped into a lot of lost valleys down that way. Any particular one?"

"Yeah. This is a valley that Hairpin lost. He wants to find it again so's him and me can retire when we get old. And he can't remember exactly where it is; he only knows the looks of it."

"What does it look like?"

"Tell him, Hairpin."

"Well," Hairpin answered mournfully, "It's been quite a spell since I was there. Always intended to go back, but never got around to it. It was somewhere on Paradise River. That's the river that runs backwards, from down in the valley up into the mountains; it disappears into a mountain spring up there somewhere."

"Now that sounds a little familiar," Rockwell answered gravely; "I heard an old prospector mention it."

"Probably," Hairpin opined. "I allus thought there was gold in the mountains around that valley, but I didn't get to look for it. I come into it in '76 with ten thousand sheep. At the time I never though about there being anything unusual about the place. I seen that water ran from the river up into the tributary creeks instead of the other way around, and I noticed it jumping up over the falls as it poured up the mountain; but we was all wore out at the time, and I didn't think about that being unusual."

"It's not unusual in Texas," Rockwell answered.

"Nothin' is unusual in Texas," Hairpin mourned. "But anyway, we beds down them sheep that night in a kind of a big box canyon and put guards against the mouth of it, so's most of us could get a little needed rest. Well, come sun-up we wake up and look around, and bedad, if there's a sheep in sight; they all plumb disappeared just like they had evaporated."

Rockwell squinted up at a passing cloud which obscured the moon for a moment. "Maybe that herd of sheep was just a mirage that looked like sheep," Rockwell answered. "They have some funny mirages in Texas. I call to mind a cattle drive I was on where we came to a river and saw a big wooden bridge crossing it over a hundred feet deep. We drove that herd out onto that bridge and halfway across, before we discovered it was a mirage; there wasn't any bridge over that creek at all."

"Mercy," Hairpin moaned. "What happened when you found out it wasn't a real bridge?"

"What could happen?" Rockwell argued. "The cattle all just suddenly tumbled into the gorge as the mirage gave way; we lost a thousand head of cattle and three riders."

"That's a sad blow," Hairpin said sympathetically. "But these was real sheep we had. We looked everywhere for 'em till about noon. We was hot and sweaty, and looking for a spring of water. Well, I saw a little hole in the ground and I thought maybe there was water in the bottom of it, so I go off my horse and got down on my knees at the rim of the hole, and looked down. Know what I saw? It like to scared me to death."

"The reflection of your face in the water?"

"Naw," Hairpin answered, hurt. "Here's what had happened to them sheep. There was a wild turnip growing there, and one of them sheep had started eating on it, and then kept on eating on it until he had dug out a hole in it. Well, another sheep must have come up and joined him and started eating on the same turnip. And then more. Anyhow, when I looked down in that hole that them sheep had et out of that turnip, I saw that all ten thousand of them sheep was down in that hole in that turnip, eatin' away at the walls of it. I reckon they had et out a space maybe ten acres around and five hundred foot deep, and hadn't reached the outside edge of the turnip at any point."

"I bet you knowed right then that you was in a mighty fertile valley," Fat Stuff prompted.

"Well, I suspected it. But havin' heard a lot of Texans talk, I just figured that was the usual size that turnips growed in Texas. What I was worried about was how we was going to get them sheep back up out of that hollow turnip after they'd et their way to the bottom of it. It was five hundred feet down to where they was."

"THAT WAS a problem," Rockwell agreed. "How'd you manage it?"

"Wasn't but one thing to do," Hairpin answered. "I went around and found me some more of them wild turnip seed, and I throwed them down into the bottom of the hole. Well, they growed so fast that by next morning the new turnip had filled up the hole, bringing the sheep back up to the ground again just like they was riding a big elevator.

"Well it was right then that I decided that this valley would be a good place for a man to get him a homestead. The ground was so rich that he wouldn't have to plant much to feed himself a long time. But it didn't work out."

"How come?" Rockwell asked.

"Well, I had me some seeds on my pack animal, and so I planted some. Me, I'm a man that never did get enough watermelon to eat in my life, so I planted me a watermelon seed. Next morning I looked out of my tent and I see something that looks like a mile-long snake squirming towards me. I got out in a hurry, and then I see it is one of them watermelon vines growing so fast that the end of it is traveling almost as fast as a horse could run. I see a watermelon growing on this moving vine, and I made a dive for it and got my arms locked around it. It wasn't no good."

"Why?"

"That growing plant dragged me so fast that it wore the watermelon plumb out, and skinned me up the same as if a horse was dragging me behind him at the end of a lariat."

"So you went without watermelon."

"I went without any kind of food. Everything growed so fast that it wore itself out before you could catch it. But me and Fat Stuff was figgering on going back and whipping that situation. We was going to plant our seeds with lariats tied to 'em to hold the vegetables still till we could pick 'em. We sure hope we can find that place again. It was the richest land I ever seen."

"It won't do you any good," Rockwell said seriously. "I know now the valley you're talking about; it was ruined years ago."

"How was that?"

"Erosion. The Year Of The Big Wind down there, the wind was blowing across the mountains around that valley so hard that in one day and night it just eroded those rocks down to almost nothing. Where there were mountains three thousand feet high the night the wind started, the next morning it was all level prairie."

"I reckon it blowed away all the gold I allowed was in them rocks" Hairpin said in a tone of disappointment.

"No," Rockwell assured him. "It was the gold that ruined the valley. You see, the gold was too heavy for the wind to blow away, so it settled to the bottom. Well, you'll

remember that the day after the big wind, the temperature rose to two thousand in the shade, some say twenty-four hundred. Anyway, it got as hot as Florida on a summer day. And you know how sunshine will evaporate the water out of a pond and suck it up into a cloud, then drop it as rain somewhere else? Well, that's what happened to your valley. The heat that day evaporated that gold. I drew it up into the clouds in liquid form, but it was so heavy that the clouds couldn't hold it. That was The Night It Rained Gold, as the prospectors call it.

"That molten gold falling in a heavy shower burned twenty seven prospectors to death, but the most damage it did was that it rained so fast that the gold didn't have time to sink into the ground, and so it hardened right on the surface. And there you are. You've got about a thousand acres of gold-plated ground that you couldn't raise a thing on because that gold is just one big sheet a thousand acres across and five feet thick. You just couldn't plant anything in it and expect it to grow. You can't plow it."

"Just my luck," Hairpin mourned. "Prettiest valley I ever seen, and now it's ruined."

"Yep. Ruined."

Hairpin said to Fat Stuff. "I reckon there ain't no doubt about him being a bonny fide Texan. You can tell 'em as soon as they open their mouths."

"Yeah," Fat Stuff answered. "You can always tell a Texan, but you never can tell him anything."

THEY HAD been riding steadily for an hour, and now they came close to the foot of the mountains which made a black background, against which Rockwell saw a single light winking. Mack Farley said, "This is it," and they pulled their horses to a stop a hundred yards or so from the light.

The moon was close to setting behind the mountain, and it already threw the mountain's long shadow over the line shack and its surroundings. Rockwell asked, "Just what lies there? What's the ground like?"

The men were dismounting, and now they clustered around in a small circle, some squatting on their boot heels."

Farley said, "It's all flat and open for a hundred yards around the shack, except to the right, looking at it from here. There's a corral on that side, and the gate is about a hundred feet from the house. The corral is pretty big, maybe five acres fenced, and there's a clump of oaks in it for shade. It's about a quarter of a mile on from the shack to the foot of the mountain."

Rockwell asked, "Where's the lad that was here earlier? Cotton?"

The youth stepped up and said, "Right here."

"Did you get a chance to notice how many horses there were in the corral at the time of the shooting?"

"I only saw three. They was tied to the corral gate."

"Well, let's get it over," Rockwell said. "We'll go the rest of the way afoot, and throw a circle around the house. By the way, what's it made of?"

"One inch pine boards, the cracks covered with battens," Farley answered. "There's a window on this side and a door on the opposite side. That's all the openings."

"All right, boys. Get your guns. And when we get the place surrounded, don't open fire till you get the word from me. Give them a chance to come out first."

6

GUNS IN THE NIGHT

JIM Rockwell led the way through the grass, leaving the Cotton youth with the horses. A little farther on they melted into moon went down the shadows as the behind the mountain, leaving them in almost complete darkness.

The men were scattered, walking

afoot, and it was impossible to see a man thirty feet distant, but sound of their boots scuffing the grassy earth kept the party reasonably close together.

Suddenly from somewhere within fifty feet of Rockwell, a pistol shot rang out. Rockwell cursed. "Who did that?"

There was no answer. Rockwell did not have time to inquire further. "Run, men," he ordered. "Open up on 'em."

Even as he raced toward the line shack with the men behind him, Rockwell knew what that shot meant; he did not believe that it was an accident.

Somebody in his party was warning the men in the line shack!

He ran with his eyes toward the lighted window. Suddenly he stopped and threw his pistol up and fired. He heard the tinkling of glass as the window went out. It was a forlorn hope, but he wanted to pin the men inside, to keep them from making a break for safety.

"Scatter," he shouted to his men. "Some of you to the right, the rest to the left. Hairpin, you and Fat Stuff hit for the corral—and shoot to kill."

He heard Fat Stuff answer, "Come on, Hairpin, show us how you fit them Apaches!"

Two quick shots rang out from somewhere in the running group, and more glass fell out of the window. The light went out at the same time, and answering shouts came from the direction of the house.

Then small lights flashed in the darkness at the shack, the orange flickers of muzzle light as the men inside fired out through the window. The night was filled with the popping of pistols and the sharper roar of rifles now; Rockwell did not hear the shots from the house as individual sounds, but the whine of bullets near him told him that the men in the house were returning the fire in dead earnest. Apparently they intended to hold the shack at any cost.

Rockwell pushed forward toward the shack, wading knee high dried grass that made a rustling noise around his ankles. A disturbed rattlesnake hissed at his feet when he stumbled over a concealed rock; Rockwell jumped forward three feet, and kept going. A hoot owl left a fence post, skimmed over the men a little more than head-high off the ground and disappeared. Rockwell kept pushing forward.

He came to within a hundred feet of the shack and circled it to the left, the side nearest him. He heard the guns of his men circling to right and left as they pumped lead into the cabin. Now they were so close that he knew that even pistol bullets would puncture the walls and do some damage in their erratic flight inside the place. He circled around the corner to come up to the only door in the place.

A man stuck his head out the window and fired right and left. Three or four guns answered his muzzle flash, and the man tumbled headlong out to the ground and lay groaning and calling for help. Nobody went to him.

Rockwell circled the blind side of the house, angling toward the corner, and there slid along the wall toward the door. This was directly opposite the side from which they had approached.

He was flattened against the wall, making his way toward the door when the dark form of a man emerged and then halted a moment as though undecided on his next move. "Get your hands up and back over this way!" Rockwell ordered.

The man whirled in the darkness and threw three quick shots at Rockwell's shadow. Rockwell answered with two slower shots. The man fell to the ground for a moment, apparently knocked down by a bullet, but he was up instantly and skittering away, to be swallowed up by the darkness just as Rockwell pulled the trigger on an empty chamber. The man escaped, headed toward the corral.

Rockwell dropped to his knees to reload his gun, then crawled along the ground toward the door. There was still irregular firing from the darkness, the bullets puncturing the

thin pine walls with twanging sounds.

Rockwell reached the edge of the door, then halted. He raised his voice, "All right, men, that's enough."

WHEN THE firing ceased, Rockwell put his left hand on the door jamb, then suddenly jumped in through the opening and backed up to the wall, exposing himself in the lighter rectangle of the opening for only the briefest moment.

A low voice inside said, "Joe? Is that you?" Rockwell said, "No," and swept the room with his gun, jumping aside as he spoke.

An answering volley roared in the room, its muzzle light flashing on and off in the far corner.

Rockwell fired twice, once to the left and once to the right of the gun flame. He heard the scuffing of boots, then the thud of a body hitting the floor. There was a long silence. Rockwell walked across the room with his gun pointed ahead of him, moving toward the sound of the falling body. He touched flesh with the toe of his boot, then a gun exploded at his feet. He returned the fire instinctively, at the same moment feeling as though a branding iron had been pressed against his leg. But he was still on his feet when he heard the grunt of the man as Rockwell's bullet hit him.

Rockwell got out a match and struck it on the wall. The last of the defenders was lying slumped in the corner with blood seeping from his chest in two places. He was dead.

The match burned down to his fingers and he struck another one. There was another dead man stretched out on the floor of the cabin.

Rockwell recognized the first of the dead men as one of those sitting in the poker game with Red Coulter and Willy Bream. He had never seen the second and younger one.

The others started streaming into the cabin, and somebody lit a lamp. Rockwell sat down on a bunk, and by the light he found that his leg had only a slight flesh wound, just enough to be painful but not serious.

"One of 'em got away," he said to those coming in. "I saw one falling out the window. and there's the other one. Somebody bring in that man outside the window. In the meantime, who are these two?"

The Box M hands were stirring around in the shack, examining bullet holes, dumping out a couple of gunny sacks of provisions that the intruders had brought along. "Looks like they intended to set up housekeeping," Fat Stuff observed. "Even brought a can opener."

Two men brought in the dead man who had toppled out of the window and laid him out beside his partner.

"Who are they?" Rockwell asked. "Anybody know them?"

"That boy over there by himself is one of our crew. Sandy Hill. He's the one they killed this afternoon. Him and Cottón was sent down here to fix the corral fence," Mack Farley answered.

"These two," Rockwell said, indicating the dead intruders. "What outfit do they belong to? Anybody recognize them?"

"I do," Mack said, shaking his head. "And it ain't going to be nice; that heavy-set one is John Dupree's younger brother. The other one is one of their regular riders. Dupree ain't going to take that laying down."

"Then he should have kept his brother off other people's range," Rockwell answered. "In my language, killing a brand's rider and taking over a piece of their range is excuse for a full-fledged war."

"I know," Mack Farley said, taking his hat off and scratching his head; "that's the hell of it. It means that Dupree is making a full-fledged war against a woman. He figures everybody else will keep out of it because—well, there's them that think Rhoda is a little proud. Not too many people like her, and I reckon Dupree figures there won't be too many that'll risk fighting him just to help a woman they don't like."

"What do you think about it personally?" Rockwell asked pointedly. "Do you think he can whip her?"

"He can unless she gets more

hands. But try and hire hands; nobody wants to work for Rhoda, except a few of us old timers that liked her dad. This is kind of home to us, but we ain't what you'd call young fire-eaters any more."

"What does he want to fight her for?"

"For herself and for ten thousand cattle grazing on a hundred thousand acres of good land. If he can't get both her and the ranch, then he'll settle for the ranch."

"So he can't get her?"

"I reckon she'd just as soon marry a sheep herder."

ROCKWELL laid this information alongside his observation of Dupree when he—Rockwell—had come upon Dupree talking to Rhoda in the parlor of the hotel. Dupree apparently was angry then; Rockwell now suspected that he had been forcing a showdown with the woman, and had come off second best.

That meant to Rockwell that Dupree had planned this first attack on her land in order to get a foothold in case she had refused to accede to a demand that they unite their holdings and themselves, as well. If she had accepted him, he could have moved his men back; if she refused—as she evidently did—then he would have dug in on her land before the fast-thinking and capable woman had a chance to defend herself.

"Well," Rockwell said, "The man has made his move, and he won't like the results of it. I'd better go down to his place and have a talk with him in the morning."

"It won't do you no good when he learns about this; you'd better take an army along."

"I don't figure it that way," Rockwell answered. "He puts up a strong front before his men. He wouldn't do himself much good facing me alone with a gun. I take it that he makes some pretense at being a man, so he wouldn't call for help from his men to do the job. I think I can ride up to his house and ride away again."

Mack Farley shook his head. "Mister, you've either got more nerve—or less sense—than anybody else around here."

Rockwell dismissed that idea. "Two of you men get this Sandy lad on a horse," he said.

Then he looked around and located Red Coulter. "Come out here, Red," he said; "I want a word with you."

Coulter's constant grin never left his face. He shrugged and threw down his cigarette, and followed Rockwell out the door and down toward the corral. They stopped by the corral gate, and both made up smokes. When they were lit, Rockwell spoke to him.

"Red," he said, "No matter what a man's morals are, I can stand him if he is honest about them. I've known a lot of crooks in my day, and I've liked some of them. I had to admire them at least for having the guts to play their hands above the table for just what they were. But there's one kind of man I can't stomach, and that's a man that tries to play both ends against the middle. A man that would double-cross the brand that's feeding him—a man that would take a woman's money and then sell her out—a man like that is so damned low that he ought to be shot. And I mean, shot in the back, without a chance to defend himself. *Don't you think so, too?"*

Red took his time inhaling and blowing out a lungfull of smoke, so that for a moment the tip of his cigarette glowed enough to light up his face, and then faded again. "You're talking about that shot before the fight started. What makes you think I fired that shot? There's a dozen that could have done it, and you couldn't have proved which one did it."

"No, I couldn't prove who did it," Rockwell answered quietly. "If I could prove it, I would do it, and then I'd blast that man to hell—not from any sense of duty to this brand, but just because of my own personal contempt for a man that would dig a hole like that for his own buddies."

"But you think I did it."

"Yes, I think you did it. I *know* it, but I can't prove it, or I wouldn't

even speak to you about it. That's why I'm giving you a chance to coil your rope and get off this range."

Red mulled this over a moment, dropped his cigarette and stamped on it. "All right, Rockwell, now I'll have my say. Willy Bream gave you a chance to talk sense tonight, but you got rough and we had to double up on you. That's all right, because he finally must have got you to see sense, or you wouldn't have been out here now. I know what's on your mind, and I'm willing to give you a tip; it won't do you any good."

"Just what is on my mind?" Rockwell asked softly.

"The same thing that's on the rest of our minds. The Box M, for a starter, then all of it. This deal is big money. You could do Dupree and Bream and the rest of us—and yourself as well—some good if you'd ride along with us. But no, you've got to play a lone hand. Rockwell, you might have been a bad boy down in Texas; the sheriff's dodger says you were. But here you're just another owlhooter on the make. We've got you outnumbered twenty to one—a hundred to one if we need that many. The mountains is full of men that would take you on and leave you lying in your own tracks. I'm telling you now; Willy thinks you're a good man for us; he thinks you'll play along like he says. When he finds out that you've got the bug in your head to grab this whole shebang off for yourself, then Willy's going to turn on you and you won't last to see one more sunrise.

"What makes you think I've got that bug in my head?"

"Why else would you be making this play? Why else would you have jumped Dupree's men? When John learns that you've killed his brother—"he paused for effect, "I'd hate to be in your boots."

Rockwell said speculatively, "So that's the way it goes. Well, Red, I'm going to let you ride off instead of blowing your guts out. I don't know why I'm doing it, but I am. But—don't let this slip your mind—if I see you on Box M land again I'm going to shoot you down like I would a hydrophobia coyote. Go get your horse and get moving!"

Red was silent a long moment, then he said, "You still believe you're a pretty hard hombre to curry, don't you?"

"Do you want to find out for sure?" Rockwell asked him.

"I'll know soon enough," Red answered. Then he turned and walked toward the horses.

7

WAR CLOUDS

THEY buried the lad called Sandy, just after daylight the next morning, placing him in a grave in the little grove of junipers where the Metcalf people and their men had been buried for a generation. There was just the tight-lipped little group of Box-M men and the girl at the graveside.

Rhoda stood dry-eyed with Jim Rockwell while they laid the boy away without any religious ceremony. The men scattered after they had placed a sandstone slab over the grave, each lost in his own thoughts. This was the first casualty of a war which they all knew was upon them, and every man of them knew that he might be the next one to be buried here under the junipers.

Rhoda turned and said to Rockwell, "What do we do now?"

Rockwell said, "I want to ride over the place, see what we've got in the way of stock, and see what might happen. I'll take a man along to show me things."

"I'll go along and show you, myself," she said.

They walked down to the corral and he saddled two horses. They were preparing to start when they saw a lone horseman riding up from the direction of the road. "John Dupree," the girl said. "I know his horse."

They dismounted and led their horses to the front of the big ranch house and waited for the rider. The girl said speculatively, "He wants to make a proposition. If he were looking for a fight, he would have brought his crew."

John Dupree rode up in front of the porch and took off his hat as he spoke to Rhoda. Then his eyes turned to Rockwell, glazed for a moment. He put both hands on his saddle horn. Rockwell was standing on the porch, leaning against the wall. He returned Dupree's stare, then his eyes dropped to Dupree's waist. He recalled Dupree's threat at their last meeting.

Dupree had left his gun and belt off!

The girl had sat down in a rocking chair, and now she seemed as composed as though nothing had happened last night. "Get down and rest your saddle," she said to Dupree. "Have a chair."

Dupree said, "No, thanks," and did not get off his horse. Then he added, "I was hoping to have a talk with you."

"All right," the girl answered. "What's on your mind?"

Dupree looked pointedly at Rockwell. "A private talk," he said.

"Oh," Rhoda answered. "Don't mind Jim sitting in; he's my foreman now. Anything of a business nature would naturally interest him. What's on your mind?"

Rockwell had finished making a cigarette, and now he started toward the end of the porch. The girl said quickly, "Don't go, Jim. You ought to hear anything Mr. Dupree has to say."

"This is personal," Dupree repeated.

"I thought I took care of everything of a personal nature last night. I tried to make it clear to you—"

"Rhoda," the man said impatiently, "you can be as contrary as the mischief when you want to. Well, I've tried to help you since your dad died, but you wouldn't let me. You've got too much of a job to handle this place right. A woman can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Well, have you? Those mountain men killed your dad, and have been stealing you blind, and you can't do a thing about it. You need a firm hand to deal with them."

Rhoda Metcalf's voice was soft, but it had steel under its velvet. "I've got a firm hand now, one that can deal with anybody that tries to steal anything from me, whether he is a mountain man, a rancher or a law officer. Or," she added pointedly, "all three."

DUPREE'S blue eyes searched her. "That sounds like you're trying to say something. Why don't you say it straight out?"

"It will be said straight out," the girl answered. "But maybe not with words. It will probably have to be said in a way to make it final."

"That sounds to me like a threat, Rhoda. If you think I'm not your friend, then you could at least have the straightforwardness to say so. Or could you?"

Rockwell saw pink spots on the girl's cheeks as she made her answer. "Yes, I could. You're an ambitious man, Dupree, but you haven't got nearly as much sense as you think you have. You wanted me while my father was alive, but he stood between you and that idea. When he died, your ambition soared. Now you want me and the ranch, both. And if you can't get both, you'll be satisfied with the ranch."

"So that's what you think of me!" he said. "I don't know how you got such an idea."

"It is written all over you. It is in everything you say to me, everything you do. You want these things, but as big as you are, you know you can't get them alone, so you have to borrow a brain. I mean the brain of Willy Bream. And you haven't the —what's the word you used?— straightforwardness in you to come right out and steal my cattle to weaken me down to a size you can handle, so you tie up with the mountain boys so they'll do that job for you. You're a lady-killer without enough intelligence to master a woman, and you're a thief without

enough gumption to do your own stealing. Does that answer your question?"

Dupree pounded the horn of his saddle with the heel of one hand, thus letting out some of the temper that had risen in him. He said, "I came here with a final offer to help you. I came in friendship, and as proof of that, I didn't even wear my gun—"

The girl interrupted. "You didn't wear your gun because you knew Jim Rockwell wouldn't shoot you down while you're unarmed. You left your gun at home to save your skin!"

"I'm sorry you won't have it any other way," Dupree snapped. "I don't want your land or your cattle. I even sent a crew of my own men—even my own brother—over here to protect your interests. I put those men into your line shack to be ready to break up a raid the mountain men intend making on you. I did it for you. And how do you repay me? You've killed my brother and one of my men. Or, rather, this longrider you've got did it. I hold that against him, not you, Rhoda; but you'd better get rid of that owlhooter quick."

"I told him to clear that line shack out," the girl answered. "And I'm telling him now to keep everybody off my land—everybody."

Dupree said angrily, "I've given you your chance, and you've thrown it back in my face. All right. I don't have to take abuse and insults from anybody. Even you. You want to take responsibility for killing my brother. All right, I'll hold you responsible."

He nodded his head stiffly, threw a quick glare at Rockwell and turned and rode away.

Rhoda watched Dupree while he rode the distance of a quarter of a mile. Her face was set and the lines around her mouth were hard. She said, half-musingly, "That man has got to be destroyed." She took a deep breath, and added tensely. "Destroyed completely! Once for all! Oh, if I were only a man!"

"That sounds a little like an order," Rockwell said.

"Why shouldn't it be?" she snapped. "If I don't destroy him, he'll destroy me."

Rockwell shrugged off the question rather than arguing it with her. He said, "Do you want to get started?"

They walked off the porch and headed for the horses. He handed her the bridle reins. She put one foot in the stirrup, then stopped. "You don't think I should want to see Dupree killed. Why?"

Rockwell again tried to avoid the subject. He made a gesture of indifference. "It's your business."

"But you don't like it. Why?" She was a persistent woman, and bluntly direct when she chose to be.

There was a touch of impatience in his answer. "My mistake, I reckon. It's just hard to get used to the idea of a woman cold-bloodedly deciding that a man had to be killed. Forget it."

She took her foot out of the stirrup and turned and looked at him with a strange interest in her face. Standing thus leaning against her horse, one hand resting on the saddle horn, Rockwell had to admit that she made a pretty picture.

"That's a strange thing for you to say," she argued. "How many notches have you got on your gun?"

He lifted the weapon out and laid it in his hand with the grip toward her. "Count 'em," he said.

She looked at the weapon. "So you don't cut notches on your gun. That merely means that you record your scalps some other way. It does not mean that you have never killed a man. You are hard, yourself; do you realize how many men you killed last night?"

"I didn't count them," he said. "Did you?"

"Yes. You killed a man in town—maybe two. You personally killed Vince Dupree and maybe one of the others out at the line shack. That's two, and possibly four that you've killed in the last few hours. That would be quite an experience for most people. But you didn't bother to count them."

"That sounds something like a

lecture, but I don't get the point of it."

"This is the point of it," she returned. "You are hard; you know the smell of gunsmoke and of death. And yet you disapprove of me trying to protect myself in the same manner of the man who is trying to destroy me. I don't quite understand you."

"I don't draw a gun on a man out of hatred," he said shortly. "Let's get started."

The hardness he had seen in her had angered him, and he knew that his answer had been cruel. He knew that she resented his speaking as he had done, but he did not care very much.

THEY RODE for a mile or so in silence, he letting her lead the way toward the mountains. She did not speak for more than half an hour, and then she said without looking at him, "Then you won't face Dupree with a gun. Why? Can't you handle him?"

"I can. But I'm not going to handle him that way—yet."

"Why not? When he is out of the picture the trouble will be over."

"The trouble would not be over if I killed Dupree like that," Rockwell said. "It would go on just as it has been doing."

"I've been in this trouble for a long time. You just came to Juniper yesterday. Why do you make a statement like that?"

"Because it's a fact. Dupree is not the brains of this business; he's just being used by a man who lets him go on thinking he is the brains. When Willy Bream is through with Dupree, then he'll get rid of him."

"You don't know Dupree," she argued. "He is a strong man, and he's got men who will follow him."

"If I shot him, he'd die a hero to those men," Rockwell answered. "And they would go on remembering what a big hombre Dupree was and would still be if he hadn't got in the way of a bullet. They would be just as dangerous without him as they are under his leadership. He's got to be deflated before he's destroyed."

"How?" she asked.

He shrugged that question off. They rode around the line camp where the fight had taken place the night before, they saw that the bodies of Dupree's men had been removed.

"He found out about the fight in a hurry," she said.

"I expect Red Coulter told him about it as quickly as he could get to his place from here."

The girl shook her head. "I can hardly believe that about Red. Are you sure you are right about his being tied up with Bream and Dupree?"

"I am sure," he answered. "He was planted on your ranch to spy on you. That's how Dupree found out what happened."

8

RHODA METCALF

AS THEY rode on along the foot of the mountain she told him things about ranch business, the number of cattle they had, the number of calves they should have had to sell but didn't have, and other things. They took a mountain trail and went up into the trees, and the heat and the still air made the woods as hot as an oven. She followed a narrow trail up to a treeless bench, and rode up to a small cabin where an old man sat in a rawhide chair which leaned against the trunk of an oak tree.

A lean yellow hound barked at them, then growled as they approached the man. The man spat and cursed the dog, driving him away with a hound's typical guilty look. The man was buggy-whip lean and his overalls hung on him like flapping sails. He had a face covered with reddish whiskers streaked with gray, and his cheeks were narrow, his eyes deepset and sharp. He did not speak when they rode up, and

Rhoda did not get off her horse.

"Eli," she said, "this is my new foreman. I just wanted you to get to know him. Name is Jim Rockwell."

"Yeah, I know about him," Eli said matter-of-factly. "Howdy," he said to Rockwell, "Git down."

"No," Rhoda answered. "We haven't time for a visit. I just wanted to make him known to you. I was thinking that we're kind of short-handed, and Dupree is making us trouble."

She paused and the old man thought this over a moment before answering. "Bad trouble?" he asked.

"He tried to take over our Willow Creek line shack last night. He killed one of our boys, and we killed two of his. He's not there now."

"He'll be back," Eli said. "If he intends to squat in that shack he'll be back. Maybe he'll be strong enough to hold it next time."

"That's what I was thinking," the girl said.

"Well," the old man decided. "Me and the boys will go down and camp there if you want us to."

"That would be mighty nice of you, if you could spare the time. Thanks."

"Better get off and set a spell," the old man said.

"No, we'll be going." She turned her horse, and Rockwell followed along. Out of hearing of the man, Rhoda said, "Eli and his boys thought a lot of my father. They'd do anything for him." And then she added, as though the thought were defensive, "And for me, too."

It was as though she suspected that Rockwell was under the impression that nobody would do anything for her, and that she felt obliged to prove to him that she did have loyal friends. That idea couldn't have been with her if she didn't know that people disliked her, Rockwell thought. "You seem to be doing all right for yourself," he observed.

"What can a woman do?" she asked. She slapped her horse with her reins in a gesture of angry frustration. "If I were only a man!"

"What would you do?"

"What do you think?" she demanded. "I'd do just what my father did! Nobody dared bother him! I'd ride right over to John Dupree's with a crew and I'd take that gentleman out and string him up to a cottonwood tree. I'd like to see him dancing at the end of a rope. Him and a dozen or so of those mountain outlaws."

"You know," he said, "I've heard quite a bit about those mountain outlaws. But I haven't seen any of them yet."

"You will," she said. "That's what you're being paid to do. Root 'em out! Shoot 'em! Hang 'em! The whole crooked bunch around here." Her emotion spent, she lapsed into silence.

THEY COVERED more ground, examined waterholes, estimated calf crops and conditions of the animals, then turned back and reached the ranch house a little after noon. As she dismounted, she said, "I'd like you to eat with me. Will you come in?"

A Mexican woman who kept the house had their dinner ready; they ate without much talk, and then went into the big living room. The girl had changed from riding breeches to a light green dress, and the change in her clothing seemed to effect a change in her whole personality. She was no longer the woman trying to do a man's job running a big ranch; she was a woman entertaining a man in her home.

And yet despite the shift of personality which she seemed to be able to change at will, there was a certain sameness about her, an alert self-interest which never left her.

She invited him to smoke, and she went to her father's liquor cabinet and brought out a bottle and a whiskey glass and set them on the mantel. She would not join him, and he poured himself a drink.

She was standing before the fireplace beside him, and her eyes were on him now, reading his every mood and gesture. "You've seen what I have got," she said. "I think it is worth fighting for. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll stay and help me?"

"I'll give you as much help as I can," he promised.

She took a step nearer to him, and she was looking at him as though she were pleading for understanding. "I don't want you to think I'm a hard, cold-blooded woman. I'm not. If I seem that way to you, just remember that my father left me a big job to do; I have to protect my home, and I have to fight men who are hard and merciless. How else can I protect myself? That's why I want you to help me. I know you're a hard man; I know you can match their cruelty if you have to. But I know more about you than that; somewhere in you there is gentleness. You are carrying a picture of some kind of a woman in your heart, and it is the picture of a woman who is soft and ladylike—the kind of a woman I would be if there were someone to do my fighting for me."

Rockwell was conscious of her every move, her every gesture. And she was truly a woman with more than her share of allurement, with more than enough of it to make a man who lived in a womanless world such as his feel the feminine power of her.

She laid a hand on the arm he had rested on the mantel. "Jim," she said, "I need you. I need you desperately. You'll stay and help me, won't you?"

He saw the things that came to her as she spoke, the slight dilation of her delicate nostrils, the subdued excitement and anticipation of an experience new to her. He read this awakening of the powerful emotion in her eyes, in the softening of her mouth, in her downward and upward glance, in the final pause and frank look of expectation as she waited for his acceptance of what added up to an almost open invitation for him to take her in his arms.

There was a silence which by its very significance quickly grew heavy. He felt the weight of this silence, and stilled the hunger in himself by sheer self-control.

"I've got to be away for a while on business," he said. "I'll be back tonight or tomorrow."

He took his hat off the mantel and turned toward the door.

The spell was broken. Her face turned delicately pink, and there was a sudden change in her voice.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Out on business."

"But what business? You are supposed to be working for me."

"You must have forgotten," he said. "I told you I'd give you such help as I could. I have something else to do this afternoon."

He could not read her thoughts then, but she was thinking furiously. He saw that in her eyes as she gazed into nothingness.

Then she faced him squarely, "Are you going to Ed Bryant's?" she asked with disconcerting bluntness.

Caught by surprise, Rockwell said, "Why do you ask that?"

"You know him," she said. "You've got business with him. I know that much!"

SHE HAD the power to anger him as no other woman had ever had. Her trick of bluntly asking shrewd questions was a device he did not find easy to handle. He could have put a man who asked such questions in his place quickly, and it angered him that she used her womanhood to shield her against such defense.

He gave her a brief, cold smile as the only answer he could think of without lying to her, and started toward the door again. She stopped him.

"You are going to Bryant's," she said flatly. "What for?"

"I didn't say what I was going to do," he reminded her; "I just can't tell you anything about it."

"Then I'll tell you. You're tied up with him; you're here because he asked you to come, and nobody is supposed to know that. But I know it, and I know why you're here."

"In that case," he answered dryly, "You don't need to ask me questions. You probably know all you need to know. You wanted my help because you needed gunhands. You didn't ask

me any questions when you asked me to help you. You wanted a long rider who didn't care which way his gun was pointed when he pulled the trigger. Well, you got one; be satisfied."

There was a touch of humor around the corners of her mouth, and it came from her confidence in the surprise she was going to give him. "That is about the longest speech I've heard you make," she said. "And you don't need to be so secretive with me. If I thought for a minute you were just another man running into these hills to hide from the law, do you think I would have invited you into my house to eat with me? Do you think I would have told you all my business? No. I know who you are, and I know why you're here."

"Then maybe you'll tell me," Rockwell suggested. He was getting impatient.

"I will, just to show you that you're not putting anything over on me. Ed Bryant is an honest rancher, and you're tied up with him. Ed was away for a week not long ago, and then you showed up. You met him in the dining room of John Brown's, and you two acted as though you were strangers. But when he passed your table going out, he dropped his pipe by your table, and when he stooped to pick it up, he said something to you. I could tell it by the look on your face at the time. You're a Cattlemen's Association man, and I suppose he told you where to meet him to talk things over. Wasn't that it?"

Rockwell studied her gravely for a moment before answering. "You thought that I was a Cattlemen's Association man that Bryant employed?"

"Yes, and I still think so."

Rockwell could not hide the things he was thinking, and she read them on his face as he turned away from her.

She flushed and grasped his arm. "Wait," she pleaded. "I know what you're thinking. I don't want you to think that of me. Listen to my side of it."

Rockwell's hard answer came sharply. "You not only tell fortunes, you read minds! You know my business, and now you know what I'm thinking." He laughed coldly.

She had grasped him by both elbows, and she stood before him, looking at him sharply as though to read his every hidden thought. "You're disgusted with me because I knew you came to help Bryant, and then tried to get you to help me instead. That's what you are thinking! But Bryant is a man; he can fight his own battles. I'm a woman; I've got to have a man to help me, or they'll destroy me."

Rockwell took her hands off his arms. "You'll get along somehow," he assured her. "And besides, you are all in the same boat here; whatever helps one of you will help the other."

He turned and went out the front door. She followed him to the porch and had her last word. "At least do this for me, won't you? Don't believe anything Mary Bryant says about me. She hates me! She'd like to see me ruined."

"I'd suggest," he said, "that you have your boys pull your cattle in closer so they can be watched."

He went on around the house and got his horse and rode out of Box M. At the front gate he looked back, and she was still standing on the porch.

9

ROCKWELL DOES SOME TALKING

ROCKWELL rode up to Ed Bryant's house in the middle of the afternoon and found a small group of ranchers there. He was introduced to Marvin Lucas and McElroy, to the Hinton brothers and several others who were sitting around in the shade of a big sycamore tree out by the spring house.

Several of the ranchers had their womenfolks with them, having come over in wagons and buckboards, and

the women were inside the house and on the front porch, busy doing things ranch women do when they get together.

Rockwell caught sight of Mary Bryant who was occupied with her guests, and he wondered what trouble there was between her and Rhoda Metcalf. He dismissed this from his mind when Ed Bryant brought up the subject of last night's fight. News flies on swift wings in a thinly populated country.

Ed Bryant was squatting on one heel in the little group of grave-faced ranchers. "These men are all my friends, Rockwell," he said, "and I can trust them. I was telling them about your coming down to help us, and they all realize that you're used to handling this kind of thing. We're all willing to do what we can to help. All you've got to do is to make your wants known. When you need us, just say the word."

Rockwell sized up the men from his seat on a horseshoe keg, and considered this. Here were six or eight ranchers, and they perhaps could raise fifteen or twenty hands from their crews. Maybe thirty men altogether, and probably none of them who had ever looked at a man over the sights of a gun. These men had the marks of hard work on them, marks that were not usually visible on men who worked for gun wages.

He felt nettled for a moment that Bryant had revealed his identity, since he had built up his entry with the purpose of working his way into the rustler group. He had made a good start when Willy Bream had taken his bait—then Rhoda Metcalf had almost ruined his plans when she effected his rescue by her men.

Now with his having killed young Vince Dupree, and with all the honest ranchers knowing his identity, he saw his original plans jeopardized by the very people he had come to help.

News flew on swift wings here, and he only had a slender hope of following his original plan. Since these men now knew his purpose here, he saw no point in withholding anything else from them. It was too late for secrecy. He decided that he had nothing to lose by laying it all on the board before them. "Are all of you men being rustled very heavy?" he asked.

They discussed this among themselves, and it added up to a steady stream of calves disappearing—mostly the quick selling short yearlings which could be grazed one season and sold profitably. They estimated that at present nearly twenty percent of the yearling crop had disappeared.

"It's them mountain men," Marve Lucas said positively, "and there ain't but one cure for it in my books. That's to round up every man of us that can lift a gun, and go up there and comb them jiggers out of the hills once and for all. And the quicker we do it the quicker it's over. Ain't that sense, Rockwell?"

"It would be if you were sure where your stock was going and who was taking it there. As it stands, you just presume that it is the mountain men stealing it."

"Who else would it be?"

"Maybe that's just how the thieves want you to think. Have any of you ever actually seen a mountain man steal a calf? Or have you actually seen any bit of evidence that points directly to the mountain men and to nobody else?"

McELROY spat in the dust. "When a man steals a bunch of calves, he don't build grandstands and sell tickets for people to watch him do it," he said. "Who else would steal 'em? They're a bunch of out-and-out thieves and killers, ain't they?"

"I expect they are," Rockwell admitted. "I'll admit I wouldn't trust a bunch of calves in their reach after dark. But that's not the point; the fact that a bunch of men are thieves doesn't mean that they happen to be the ones that did any one particular job of thievery."

"It looks to me," Lucas said, "like you're trying to destroy about the only hope we've got. You're trying to argue the innocence of the only

people that could be the thieves."

"That's not the point at all," Rockwell said. "I'm just trying to show you that maybe there are other thieves who could help themselves to your stock, knowing that you'd blame the mountain men. Like I say, I haven't got anything positive yet, but the little things that are shaping up point in that direction."

"You got some ideas?" Ed Bryant asked hopefully.

"Yes, I have," Rockwell answered, "But they're only odd bits of information; they're not court proof against anybody."

"Me," Lucas said, "I don't need any court proof. Court proof ain't worth nothing where you ain't got no courts. Just convince me who's doing this, and I'll do my share taking care of 'em."

There was a murmur of agreement with this point of view, and this was a thing that Rockwell was very much interested in. He had already formed some conclusions about the pattern of this trouble, but he had also got the notion that he was going to find it next to impossible to lay down a cut-and-dried case before these men. He had little hope of finding incontrovertable evidence to back up his ideas.

"I'm going to tell you gentlemen something," he said. "I don't make a habit of jumping at conclusions about a piece of trouble, and offering guesses instead of facts. But as I see it now, you haven't got *one* big piece of trouble; you've got several small pieces that kind of wind around each other and reinforce each other. You know, like half a dozen stems of wild honeysuckle that twist around each other like the strands of a lariat, and make the whole thing a whole lot stronger than if each separate strand stood by itself.

"What I mean is that there are several different people back of this, and they help each other for the present, each for his own reason. Of course, once their combined weight has crippled you people enough, they'll quit helping each other and start fighting among themselves for the spoils. But that will be after you are whipped, and won't do you any good.

"You can see, then, that if you caught one man or one group of men pulling a fast one, and if you destroyed them, you still wouldn't have the problem whipped. There are still other sources of your same trouble, like a creek fed by many springs. We've got to dry up each source separately."

"Just show me a few of them springs," Marve Lucas growled, "and I'll muddy up their water for 'em. This business is breaking me in a hurry."

"I'm going to have to locate those springs one at a time, and try to dry it up," Rockwell answered. "The reason I was telling you these things is that I might have to call on you for help, and maybe pretty soon. And another thing, you men know each other, and you trust each other. Somebody has likely been trusting the wrong man—or men."

"Maybe you could name off some of them," Bryant said.

"This is what I'm going to do," Rockwell answered. "I'm going to give you an outline of what is happening as I see it, and the details are going to have to be filled in as we go along. Here it is; some of it is fact, the rest is what seems to be apparent from the facts.

"Old Bob Metcalf was shot in the back. Everybody assumes that the mountain men did it, but nobody actually knows. The fact is, anybody could have done it, and there are plenty of people around who could profit by his death, because it leaves Box M free to whoever can take it."

"Sure," Lucas opined. "A hundred thousand acres of land and ten thousand cattle and a pretty girl could tempt lots of folks besides mountain men, when you come to think about it."

"Or any one of the three," Bryant added, "The land or the cattle or the girl."

"The land lies along the mountains, and it has got more and better water than the rest of you. It ad-

joins John Dupree's land, and if it were united with his, it would be a mighty big outfit. You people have been losing cattle; Rhoda Metcalf has been losing cattle. But who moves in on her land? Who kills one of her hands and fights to defend the point they've gained? Not the mountain men that you've been blaming for your losses, but Dupree."

"It looks like we ought to measure him for a rope," Lucas growled.

"Maybe," Rockwell answered. "But he's got a lot of men who are going along with him on this deal. Men like Red Coulter, who are also figuring on their slice of the pie. String him up and those men shift over to another leader and go right on. They're running wild in Juniper, too. Remember last night, they tried to slaughter three of Rhoda Metcalf's men for taking me away from the town marshal. You didn't hear of any of his men going to jail for that, did you?"

"Willy Bream is a Dupree man," Bryant said; "Dupree's boys never go to jail."

"Did you ever look at it the other way around?" Rockwell asked. "Which one of that pair would you say was the brains and which one the muscle? You don't often find a surplus of both in the same man, you know. How about Dupree being a Bream man?"

ONE OF the Hinton brothers whistled his surprise. "I never looked at it thataway," he said. "Come to think about it, Dupree got everything he's got just through riding roughshod over men smaller than him. I'd say Willy Bream has got more of a mind behind them catfish eyes of his than Dupree. Leastwise, I'd feel I knew more where I stood with Dupree than with that hoot owl."

Bryant added, "He's a slippery hombre, all right, and he's got something up his sleeve. He's buying land right along, and he ain't doing that on a hundred and fifty a month."

Rockwell said, "I came here following a dodger I sent out branding me as a thief and a murderer. The first thing Bream did was to try to get the deadwood on me. He didn't want to send me back to Texas—he said as much. What he wanted was to force me to play along with him. Doing what? Doing whatever he's doing.

"Red Coulter was working for the Metcalf spread, but he was playing around with Bream and Dupree's men. He told me enough then to let me know that I could play along with him and Dupree and Bream, and do better for myself than I could trying to steal the whole Metcalf place single handed. Remember, he thought I was an outlaw. In short, those men are joined together in some kind of agreement to first get hold of Box M, and then the rest of this whole range. They started first with her because she's a woman and can't fight back too hard, and because they know that she hasn't many friends who'll risk their necks to help her. Red told me that Willy Bream was the ox with the long horns in this business. I believe him, not because I take his word, but because that's the way I read Bream as compared with Dupree. Dupree looks like the worst booger bear, but I'll put my bet on Willy Bream."

The men talked this over among themselves for a while, and then Ed Bryant asked, "Well, how are we going to crack it?"

"That depends," Rockwell answered. "I had laid the groundwork for Willy Bream to pick me up and make me a proposition. It was working out the way I had planned it, when something went wrong. I hadn't planned on being rescued, but I got rescued anyway. So I had to act out my part, and before I was through, I was fighting Dupree. I had already figured that maybe Bream was going to put me to work for Dupree, but of course, the fight tore that idea up good and proper."

"You won't be likely to work for Dupree now," Bryant agreed. "Not since you killed his kid brother. I reckon Vince was the only person in the world he thought anything of.

He's going to hold that against you."

"I know," Rockwell admitted, "and I've got to somehow make use of that fact. But right now, I've got other fish to fry. I'm going into town tonight and maybe Bream will make another effort to pin me down. I'll see that he succeeds this time."

Then he gave them a word of caution. "I'd suggest that all of you who can had better pull your stock in closer to home. Bunch it so you can keep a sharp eye on it for a while."

"I've got most of mine already in," one of the Hinton boys said. "We're watching it day and night till this is over."

They talked a while and then broke up, McElroy riding off toward town, and then later the Hinton boys drifting on to their own place. A little later a few of the families hitched up their buckboards and left. By suppertime, Rockwell was the only visitor remaining, and he had stayed at Ed Bryant's insistence.

10

NIGHT IN TOWN

JIM ROCKWELL met Mary Bryant, and as her father introduced them, the first thing that came to his mind was the fact that now he could see her eyes closely enough to identify the color. They were so dark blue that they gave the impression that they might be black. They were eyes that looked out on the world with a quiet reserve and dignity, and they had no guile flitting behind them. And the rest of Mary Bryant was a fitting showcase for the eyes.

She moved at her ease as she prepared and served the supper she had cooked for the three of them, and she was neither forward nor shy, but was completely the mistress of herself and her surroundings. She left the talking to the men until Rockwell tried to draw her out.

"I imagine you find this trouble exciting," he offered.

"No," she answered, "It is not exciting. It is just a terribly unjustified and unnecessary disturbance of our lives, and it can only bring unhappiness to everybody. I think everybody will be the loser. Even the people who will seem to win will be losers."

"That's always the case," Rockwell answered. "Well, maybe we will break it up. It might do the country some good to see a bunch of rustlers hanging from a tree."

"Such a sight could never do anybody any good. It is bad enough that men have to die so that others can live in peace; it must be terrible to have to have a part in punishing them."

"I thought you'd like to see them punished."

"No. I realize it has to be done for the safety of the rest of us, but I couldn't get any satisfaction out of taking vengeance against them. I think of punishment as a sad duty, not as a vengeful satisfaction."

"Then you wouldn't want to be a man and go out and fight?"

She smiled at him. "No, indeed. That is a man's work, and I don't envy him the job."

They finished supper and went to the living room where Rockwell stayed as long as he dared linger, then forced himself to express his thanks and take his departure. He felt the peace and serenity that emanated from her presence like a breath of cool air on a parched and poisonous desert. And not once during the talk did she bring up the name of Rhoda Metcalf, although she must have learned that Rockwell had just come from Box M.

He rode into Juniper after dark and tied his horse in front of *The Rest*. Stepping up onto the sidewalk he stopped to roll a cigarette as was his custom, keeping his hands busy while he surveyed the street in both directions.

There were many horses at the

racks tonight more than he had seen on Saturday night. He opened his senses to the mood of the town, taking in the small groups lounging in the semidarkness around building fronts, noting the way men walked, testing the air generally. Tonight, he knew, Juniper was tense, was waiting for something to happen. It was expecting something. He had sensed the streets of dozens of towns under similar circumstances, and he knew that he could trust his senses. Juniper was looking for trouble.

He had no specific plan. He wanted to manage somehow to contact Willy Bream, and to let the play go on from there as it would. And yet he could not go looking for the marshal; the meeting had to be a natural one. He walked up to the hotel and took a chair out on the porch next to where the fat man sat in his reinforced seat and surveyed the town with the eyes of an old and tired night hawk, too tired to go looking for prey for himself, but still instinctively interested in the hunt for its own sake.

"Hot," Rockwell observed.

"You'd find it cooler up in the hills," Brown said indifferently. "Particularly tonight."

"Oh, I'll sleep with my window open and make out someway," Rockwell countered.

"That won't make it cooler—for you."

"If you're trying to tell me something, tell me," Rockwell said.

"Me, I ain't got nothing to tell anybody. I was just saying you'd find it cooler up in the mountains."

"But why?"

John Brown bobbed his head toward the street in general. "Ever see a bunch of buzzards circling over a cow that's going to die? Who tells 'em there's going to be a cow die? But they know it, and they come a flocking. When you see 'em, you know why they're there, don't you?"

Rockwell chuckled. "You've turned philosopher on me."

"A man sitting still has time to look around him and learn to see with his eyes. I had plenty of time to sit and learn to use my eyes. You saw to that."

"And so you see a lot of buzzards collecting to watch me die. I wonder who's going to kill the calf?"

"Ask any one of them. They can tell you. But not me."

ROCKWELL got to his feet. "I believe I will," he said, and went down to *The Rest* and ordered a drink at the bar.

The bartender looked at him queerly and set out a bottle. "What's the matter?" Rockwell asked. "You think you're looking at a corpse?"

The bartender took his money and rung it up without answering. He threw the change on the counter and went off to the other end of the bar, as though escaping from a grizzly joke.

Then the batwings flew open and Hairpin and Fat Stuff came hurrying in. When they spotted him, they joined him, and Fat Stuff threw down two quick drinks which Rockwell bought him.

"You drink that like you'd just seen a ghost," Rockwell said. "What are you buzzards doing in town?"

"What are *you* doing here?" Fat Stuff asked. "Us and Mack has been ready to go?"

"Go where?"

"Back home."

"I haven't got a home," Rockwell answered. "I've just got a room at John Brown's."

"Back to the Box M. We'll help you get out of town safe."

"Do I look drunk enough to need help?"

"Are you crazy?" Hairpin asked dolefully. "Don't you know John Dupree is combing these streets for you? He's told everybody in town that he's gonna kill you on sight for shooting his brother."

"Maybe he's drunk, talking so much."

"No, he's talking so much so's you ain't got no choice but to meet him or let everybody know you're afraid to meet him?"

"And you want me to slip out of town without meeting him?"

"But don't anybody know you're in

town yet. You can get out without nobody knowing it."

"You think I'm afraid to meet him?"

"Looky here," Hairpin pleaded. "You know Miss Rhoda done give us three the job of keeping your skin from getting punctured. Me, I don't like it, but I got to obey orders. I never did cotton to the job of protecting somebody else's hide, and protecting you is getting to be quite a chore. I'm gonna ask for a raise if it keeps up. Now come on and don't make us no more trouble. Them hombres last night shot a heel off one of my brand new thirty-dollar hand-stitched boots. I don't want the other heel shot off tonight. Come on home, will you?"

Rockwell gave this some thought. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I can't do that, but maybe I can get you out of this fix you are in. This Dupree fancies himself as somewhat of a gunslinger, doesn't he?"

"He thinks he is, and he is," Hairpin said.

"Do you suppose he'd shoot an unarmed man in the presence of a crowd of people?"

"He wouldn't do that," Fat Stuff answered. "He thinks too much of his rep as a fighter. But a man he was after had better meet him with a gun than without one. If you didn't have a gun, Dupree would *sure* kill you then—with his two fists. That would be a plumb awful way to die."

"And if I was to commit suicide, then you wouldn't have to be going around looking after me, would you?"

"Aw, now," Hairpin said, "Don't go plumb loco on us. You got a better chance trying to match him with a gun."

Rockwell was unbuckling his gunbelt. He laid the belt and holstered gun on the bar and spoke to the bartender. "Hold this for me until I get back."

Then he said, "All joking aside, boys. I don't want you trailing me tonight, no matter what Rhoda Metcalf says. If Bream starts to throw me in jail, you just go on and let him throw me in jail. You understand?"

"Are you serious?" Fat Stuff asked.

"Never more serious in my life."

Hairpin shook his head in disgust. "No, sir," he opined. "You can't never tell a Texas man nothing, no time. Well, it was nice knowing you."

"I'm going over to *The Traveler's*," Rockwell told them. "You'd better stay out of the place. Like you said last night, there are germs there; there might be something catching, like bullet-itis."

ROCKWELL left *The Rest* and walked directly across the street. Hairpin and Fat Stuff followed him at a short distance, as he had expected them to do.

He shoved the batwings open and went into *The Traveler's*. The bar was across the back of the room here, and he walked the distance from the door to the bar in a sudden silence which had descended on the crowd that packed the place.

The bartender's face froze at the sight of him. The man's eyes went wide, and he stood with his cigar in his yellow stained teeth and looked speechless at Rockwell.

Rockwell looked through the backbar mirror and did not see Willy Bream in the room. Then he gave his attention to the bartender.

"Anybody been asking for me?" he asked. "My name is Rockwell."

The bartender took his cigar out of his mouth and took a deep breath. After an effort to capture his speech, he said, "Don't remember anybody inquiring for a party by that name."

"In case they do, I'll be here for a while," Rockwell said. He pointed to a nearly full bottle of whiskey on the backbar. "I'll take that bottle and a glass. No chaser."

He poured himself a drink and toyed with it for a long while before drinking it. There was movement behind and around him. Several men from the bar found seats at tables. Others strolled out. A couple of others went over and stood behind a table of poker players, their attention concentrated on the play. Rockwell took another drink. Time ticked on.

Conversation faded to nothingness in *The Traveler's*. The green parrot in the cage on the backbar screeched, "Murder! Murder!" as he had done for years, and everybody jumped at the sudden breaking of the silence. Then it was quiet again. Rockwell had another drink, and leaned with his elbows on the bar.

"'You might go out on the street and find the man that was looking for you," the bartender said nervously.

"I'll wait around," Rockwell answered. "He might show up."

And then the doors swung open and John Dupree walked in.

11

THE MAN WHO COULDN'T BE WHIPPED

DUPREE stood just inside the door of the saloon with his legs spread slightly. His hat was on the back of his head, showing the white line made by its sweat band. His eyebrows were a shaggy yellow against the red of his face and his mouth with its bulldog underjaw, revealed the whiteness of his lower teeth.

He stood thus a moment while the little noises in the crowded saloon died away to a gripping silence. The parrot on the backbar shouted, "Murder!" and the bartender turned and tossed a towel over his cage. The lone man remaining at the bar except for Rockwell, picked up his glass of beer and went over and leaned against the wall.

Rockwell stood alone, half turned at the bar and glanced around the packed room. The ceiling was low and the air filled with smoke and the odor of beer and whiskey, while the moist sawdust on the floor gave it a grateful coolness.

He checked faces. These were men sympathetic with, if not actually working with, Dupree and Willy Bream under cover. There may have been a few who had no interest one way or another, but had come, as John Brown had said, because the vultures always come flocking when the smell of death is in the air. They were all sober faces, expressionless faces. They were buzzards waiting.

He saw three people he knew, Mack and Hairpin and Fat Stuff; they were not together, but were spotted inconspicuously about the room.

He turned his gaze back toward John Dupree.

Dupree found himself caught in an unexpected situation when he saw that Rockwell had shed his gun. He had not expected this, and it took him a moment to adjust to it, to shift his thinking from his planned use of the gun. He was breathing hard and keeping his eyes on Rockwell while he made these changes in his thinking.

Rockwell turned his glance back to the bar and poured himself another drink, took his time about drinking it. The gesture of casualness had its calculated effect, the suggested taunt whipping the volatile Dupree to a sudden fury.

Dupree came across the twenty feet of open floor space between the door and the bar, and his bootheels made the only sound in the room. He stopped some four feet from Rockwell. "Couldn't stand up to it, huh?" he asked.

"To what?"

"Never mind the stalling. You heard I was after you, so you shed your gun in a hurry across the street. You think that'll save you?"

"You thinking of shooting me down?" Rockwell asked.

"I was, if you'd had the nerve to stand up to me," Dupree said slowly. "But it's better this way." He was unbuckling his gunbelt as he spoke. He slapped the belt and holstered weapon down on the bar. "Yes, sir, much better than I expected; now I'll be able to see what makes the wheels go round in you."

"I think I've told you before," Rockwell said, "that you talk too

much. I'm beginning to believe that you're all wind."

"Wind or no wind, I told you to get out of the country. You didn't do it, and now it's too late."

"I'll be going," Rockwell answered, "but not until I see you dead."

Dupree turned to the bartender. "You hear that, Morgan? He's threatening to kill me. Here's a common punk of a cheap stage robber that comes here and threatens me. Well! Well! That's just fine."

Rockwell turned part of his attention to the bartender, as Dupree's talk had intended for him to do, then quickly turned his eyes back to Dupree—just in time to see Dupree make a sudden lunge toward him.

ROCKWELL had read Dupree's intentions, and he was ready. His hand had gone to the neck of the almost full whiskey bottle; now he picked it up by the neck and took a backward step out of Dupree's reach.

He hefted the bottle with a long looping backswing and brought it down squarely on Dupree's forehead. Dupree, his full weight lending him momentum, could not dodge the blow, and the bottle crashed on the hard bone of his skull and broke. The front of his big hat caught some of the effect of the blow, but there was still enough force behind it to stagger him. A broken point of the glass plowed a red furrow down from his forehead to the point of his cheek.

Dupree felt the shock of the blow to the extent that he had to grasp the bar with his hand to make sure that he did not fall. His eyes went blank for a short period while he stood in a daze. His right fist dropped to his side.

Old Hairpin could not restrain himself, but shouted from somewhere in the crowd, "Finish him off, Texas. Keep him reeling!" There was a nervous shifting of feet around the walls.

John Dupree should have been lying on the floor unconscious from the force of the blow, but he was not; he was one of that type of men whose skulls are thick and whose nerves are but little sensitive to pain. The blow dulled his wits, slowed him down momentarily, but left him a dangerous man still. The effect of it was like a goad to a brute animal; it aroused a killing rage in him which drowned out all sensitivity to his own pain or injuries.

Dupree shook his head and lowered it, charging Rockwell like a bull. Rockwell brought a fist up from his knees and buried it in Dupree's lowered face. It made a squashing sound as it landed, but it did not halt Dupree. Rockwell whipped right and left against Dupree's head as Dupree bored his skull into Rockwell's middle. The blows cracked soundly on bone and flesh, but they did not halt Dupree.

Rockwell gave way, backing up from the momentum of Dupree's charge which he could not halt. The movement pushed Rockwell the width of the room, where he backed up against the now-emptied poker table. That halted his backward movement, and Dupree could push him no farther.

Now Dupree had both fists doubled and, still keeping his head down for protection, he began systematically pounding Rockwell in the stomach with both hands. Rockwell's middle was a solid sheath of muscle, but the blows came in like the pounding of sledgehammers against a woodchopper's wedge, and they sent their messages of pain clear around to his backbone.

Dupree had him cornered and his blows were of a force to wear Rockwell down quickly while Rockwell's own blows against Dupree's heavy skull had little effect.

This was the secret of Dupree's rise to power—his iron body, a mass of bone and muscle which could take all the punishment a man could give him, and still leave him enough strength and energy left to destroy an enemy with his own hands. It made him almost impregnable to physical attack; it made him boss of Juniper range; no man could whip him.

Rockwell, with his back to the table, picked up a chair, lifting it over his head as he suddenly rolled his body around, sliding out from between Dupree and the table, getting free enough to step back into the clear.

He swung the chair, bringing it down with all his strength. Dupree saw it coming in time to throw his arm over his head, warding the full force of the blow off his head, catching some of it on his forearm. The chair snapped asunder and the front tered on Dupree's thick skull. The rungs between the front legs of the chair snapped asunder and the front legs themselves came loose, leaving part of the wreckage hanging around Dupree's neck, leaving the rest of the chair still in Rockwell's hands.

That breaking chair sent its splintering sound through the saloon and brought other sounds from the throats of the watchers. Fat Stuff shouted, "You got him now, Texas! Beat him down!"

DUPREE had backed off a couple of steps and was tugging at the splintered wreckage around his neck. He got it loose finally and threw it straight at Rockwell's head. Rockwell ducked it, and it sailed on and hit a customer who dodged too late. The customer cursed and wiped blood off a wounded cheek bone.

Dupree had backed against the foot of the table for leverage, and propelled himself forward again. His great weight gave him momentum, and this advantage was one he always used to its good effect. It was a habitual thing with him; it was done instinctively.

Now his instinct caused him to throw himself squarely into the path of the chair back that Rockwell again swung at him. The broken wood came down against his upraised arm and broke the bones of his wrist.

He kept moving till he hit the wall at a point hastily vacated by the onlookers standing there. He turned and stood with his back against the wall, his right hand balled into a fist, his disabled left hanging loosely by his side.

Knowledge of his injury slowly penetrated his brain and he lifted his left hand in front of his face and stared at it. His red face was streaming perspiration and blood; he wiped his eyes with his sleeve and looked again at his hand. He tried to close it, and it wouldn't close. He stared at the hand with uncomprehending eyes, as though he were trying to figure out a puzzle that was a little too much for him. He kept on trying to work the fingers, and they wouldn't work. He caught the hand with the other hand and felt of it here and there, exploring it with his good fingers. He felt the break at the wrist, and his searching fingers experimented with it. Every man in the room could see that the hand was out of alignment with the forearm.

Dupree's eyes were bloodshot now like those of an enraged animal, and he turned their malignance on Rockwell. Rockwell had done something to his hand—exactly what, he did not clearly understand, but the thought of it fed the fires of his rage—and Dupree suddenly lunged away from the wall, lifting his left elbow in a protective position.

"I'm going to kill you," he said. "I'm going to tear you apart." He looped a swinging right first that grazed the top of Rockwell's bowed head, and Rockwell came into an unexpected opening and pulped Dupree's mouth with a twisting blow that ground his fleshy lips into his protruding teeth.

The blow staggered Dupree, but it did not floor him. The man seemed to be immune to punishment; all Rockwell's considerable strength seemed to do nothing except infuriate him the more. Dupree stepped aside, circling as he parried with his left arm. Then his right fist drove out again and caught Rockwell squarely on the nose.

Rockwell saw the room explode in a flash of blinding lights; he felt the floor fly out from under him and then come up behind him and slam him in the back of the head. An agony

of pain swept from his head clear down to his vitals. He tried to look around him, and the world was a confused mass. His eyes were out of focus. He licked his lips and tasted the salt of his own blood. He tried to breathe and there was no air passage through his nose, he opened his mouth and took in great gulps of air.

Rockwell could not hear, but he saw Dupree's yellow boots level with his own eyes, and approaching him; then he knew that he had been knocked down, and that the blow had stunned him. Dupree was coming; Dupree would kick his guts out.

HE TRIED to roll over to escape the punishment of Dupree's boots, and rolled against a table leg. He got to his hands and knees, and when he raised himself, he bumped his head against the underside of the table top. He had fallen under the poker table.

Rockwell raised up anyway, bringing the table with him, gripping the table by its legs.

Dupree saw that Rockwell was still groggy. He said exultantly, "Now I've got you."

Rockwell sidestepped, bringing the upturned table between himself and Dupree, playing for precious seconds of time in which to recover his fuzzy senses. He couldn't think clearly, but he knew Dupree realized this and would make the most of it.

Dupree grabbed up one of the overturned chairs, tried to use his left hand also to hold it, but he abandoned the effort and hefted the chair with his right hand. "Now, friend," he said. "How do you like this?"

He swung the chair toward Rockwell's head, and Rockwell had to duck behind the table to avoid its full weight. The chair crashed down on the edge of the table top and splintered, leaving the ragged back and seat in Dupree's hand. The remains of the chair were lighter now, easier to handle—and made a more deadly weapon for Dupree.

Rockwell suddenly shoved the table toward Dupree, tipping it over until the top of it came down squarely on the floor, leaving it completely upside down. The edge of the top scraped down against Dupree's instep as he came rushing forward, and the sudden impediment tripped him. He fell over forward.

With this momentary respite as Dupree got to his feet, Rockwell grabbed up another one of the chairs, and as Dupree came up they faced each other with their weapons.

Rockwell used the legs of his chair like the prongs of a pitchfork, driving Dupree backward, shielding his head from Dupree's swinging chair back. He pressed toward the big man step by step like a swordsman driving an opponent back; finally Dupree stood with his back to the wall, a snarling, defiant animal still breathing destruction.

Rockwell pinned him to the wall with the chair, and Dupree could not use his club. But the killer urge of the animal was still with him, and instinct as well; he lifted his foot and jammed it into Rockwell's groin with all his strength.

Rockwell's face went gray with the agony of the blow, and momentarily his strength drained from him. Dupree pushed away from the wall, following up his advantage with instinctive speed. Rockwell was going backward now, only his chair between himself and the raging Dupree.

He was never in greater danger than at this moment, for the agony that coursed through his vitals brought a nauseating sickness and weakness with it—Dupree was well aware of this and was making the most of it. With this advantage, he rushed forward suddenly, flailing with his club above, below and around the defensive chair in Rockwell's hands, darting, shifting, lunging with all the speed he could get into his massive body, trying to push home his advantage.

Rockwell swung his chair in a sweeping sideways swing and knocked Dupree's club sailing across the room and into the gathering of men along the wall, leaving Dupree unarmed in front of him. The shock

of the blow and the surprise of it left Dupree standing and staring blankly as he realized that the advantage had shifted away from himself to Rockwell.

Rockwell saw and interpreted this, and then he did a calculated thing. He threw his own chair away and faced Dupree barehanded again.

DUPREE'S bloody and bruised face broke into what was almost a grin at this gesture, and he went for Rockwell with a startling suddenness. His fist grazed Rockwell's chin and he kept coming, his weight slamming into Rockwell. He kneed Rockwell in the groin again, drove Rockwell back with the punishment of it.

Rockwell caught his breath, braced himself and threw an uppercut into Dupree's chin. The blow landed solid, shocking Rockwell himself as the pain of it ran up his arm and into his shoulder. It was the hardest blow he had ever hit a man, and it lifted Dupree's head upward until he was facing the ceiling.

Dupree staggered back under the impact of it, and Rockwell followed in quickly. Dupree lifted both arms trying to fend off the sudden rain of blows that Rockwell threw at him. Rockwell hit him in the belly; he pounded his nose and chin, then sent slugging impacts to his heart, and back to the face again. He gave Dupree no surcease, poured his punishing fists into the staggering rancher. He saw the muscles sag in Dupree's face, saw the tautness loosening in him as his muscles went slack under the terrible punishment he was taking. Rockwell breathed deep and pumped more blows into the man.

Rockwell never let up; he never let Dupree get back into balance, but kept driving him backward toward the wall. Dupree's defensive movements of his arms became slower; his arms grew leaden with the punishment that he was taking, and he could no longer ward off the slugging fists that tortured him. His mind grew drugged and refused to command his body. He kept backing away, and the men along the wall made room for him; presently he was backed squarely against the wall and could retreat no farther.

Rockwell cocked his fist and drove it squarely into Dupree's white teeth with a pile-driver impact that bounced Dupree's head back against the boards with a thud that sounded like a man trying to break a coconut against a stone. Dupree's eyes went glassy and his shoulder muscles sagged as he dropped his guard.

Rockwell picked up a chair. "The next time you intend to kill a man, don't advertise it so much."

Then he crashed the chair down over Dupree's head, beat Dupree to the floor with it while it splintered in his hands. Dupree went down to his hands and knees and tried to crawl away from the fury of the man he intended to tear to pieces with his hands. He ducked his head and crawled along the wall, sweat and blood dripping from his face.

It was cruel; it was primitive; but it was the only lesson that John Dupree and his cohorts would understand. It was the only thing that would break Dupree's influence over the renegades he controlled.

Rockwell threw the broken wreckage of the chair after the crawling man. Dupree kept crawling along the wall like a stricken bear, and Rockwell walked beside him until he reached the door of the saloon. There Dupree pulled himself to his feet with his one good hand and stopped and looked dazedly around the saloon with eyes that saw little.

His face was a bloody mass, his eyes were fast swelling and one was puffed so that it was completely closed. His nose was flattened and his lips were puffed to twice their normal size and the color of beef liver. Blood and sweat plastered his white silk shirt to his body; it was ripped and torn, and there were big patches of filthy sawdust clinging to it where his shoulders had come into contact with the floor.

He reeled drunkenly and faced the batwing doors. He knocked one of them open with a blow of his fist

which expressed the venom still flowing through his veins. He staggered out into the night.

ROCKWELL went over to the bar and said, "Line up a dozen cold bottles of beer on the counter." He turned and said, "Mack, you boys come over here."

There was a chorus of throat sounds in the room that sounded as though twenty men were expelling their breath after holding it all during the fight. Somebody said, "Good Lord Almighty!" and followed it with a long exhaling groan. Another man groaned and said, "I never seed the like in all my borned days!"

The tension unwound like a broken clock spring, and Mack Farley and Hairpin and Fat Stuff were at the bar drinking Rockwell's beer.

Hairpin said dolefully, "It puts me in mind of the time down in Texas when I entered one of them old-time rodeo contests where you get down on your knees and try to out-butt a bull buffalo. It cured a hangover headache I'd been nursing for three weeks."

"Shut up," Fat Stuff snapped. "You just seen something you'll never see again as long as you live; I still can't believe it."

Rockwell felt the change in the atmosphere of the saloon. It was a noticeable thing. When he had come in, these men knew he was in territory where he was not welcome; they had shied away from him, hanging around to see him get whipped or killed. But he had demonstrated Dupree's vulnerability; shown them that he was a better man than Dupree. Dupree's prestige was broken; Rockwell's was up. They tried to buy him drinks, they congratulated him; the crowd always goes along with a winner.

Rockwell accepted a cigar that was thrust into his hand. He bit the end off and lit it, and the taste stung his mouth. The reaction was setting in; pains began coursing through his body, his overworked muslces began to draw and to ache. He had taken an awful punishment himself, and the letdown left him tired and sore and irritated.

He wanted to go to his room and rest, but he had to wait to give Willy Bream a chance at him. He stood around the bar for half an hour and nothing happened. He began to wonder at the absence of Bream, who could hardly have failed to hear about the fight if he were in town.

Then on a sudden impulse he said to Mack Farley, "I'm going to my room for a while. I'll see you later."

"But what about—"

Rockwell interrupted. "Never mind what anybody told you to do about me. Just don't interfere, even if I rot in jail." He turned and left the saloon.

He went on down to the hotel, through the vacant lobby, and up to his room. He turned the key in the lock and stepped into his darkened room and closed the door behind him.

He saw a vague dark form as a pistol was thrust into his ribs. Willy Bream's voice came to him. "Now we'll finish that trip down to the jail and have our little talk. Just step out into the hall and we'll take the back stairs and avoid the crowds."

12

HIGH STAKES

ROCKWELL had left his gun at the saloon, and it suited him now to let Bream take him along without too much of a show of resistance. He had built up a sufficient reputation for hardness to carry him through. He was convinced that Red Coulter had reported to Dupree and possibly directly to Bream as well, concerning the fight at the line shack. He was certain that Bream knew all about the fight in the saloon, and had kept out of the place because of the presence of the Metcalf men, not want-

ing to again see his prisoner taken away from him.

"All right," Rockwell told Bream. "You've got the dogwood on me right now, what's the charge?"

"Escape," Bream said softly. "You escaped from my custody last night, didn't you?"

"Is that all?" Rockwell answered.

"It might be more than enough," Willy Bream answered softly. "Out the door and down the hall, and don't make any noise. I don't like disturbances."

John Brown thrust his massive head out of a suddenly open door, and said, "Where are you going with that man, Willy?"

"I'm taking him to jail. Any objections?"

"He owes me two dollars room rent."

Rockwell tossed him two silver dollars which he pocketed.

"Any further objections?" Willy asked dryly.

"None whatever," the fat man answered, and closed the door.

Rockwell went along peacefully. They went down the outside back stairs, up the alley, and took a dark route to the jail. The place was a small corrugated-iron building with a pair of double strap-iron cells built against the back wall. In the free space between the front door and the cell block there was a pine desk and chair, a spittoon, a bulletin board, and a couple of rifles in one dusty corner. The bulletin board was filled with wanted dodgers, some old and faded, some new.

The jail air was hot and stuffy, and the floor filthy. Bream lit a lamp, opened the drawer to his desk and took out a bunch of keys fastened together with a horseblanket safety pin, and opened a padlocked cell door. "Just step inside," he said gently, and Rockwell obeyed him.

Bream threw the keys back into the drawer after locking the cell door, drew his chair up outside the cell and sat down. He took his time about preparing and lighting a cigar. "Tell me, Rockwell," he said. "How many stages have you robbed? And how many notches have you got on your gun?"

"You didn't bring me down here to hear me brag about my doings, did you?" Rockwell asked.

There was something about Bream's attitude that Rockwell didn't like. Bream seemed to be too complacent, and there was an air about him that suggested a repressed exultance. He had a good poker face, with his expressionless eyes and his unsmiling thin lips, but Rockwell was sensitive to these things; he knew that Bream had something hidden up his sleeve.

"No, I didn't expect to hear you sound off about your killings. I just brought you down here for the same reason I started to bring you last night. You have violated a law in escaping from an officer, and so I'm going to hold you till you pay your fine. It's five hundred dollars."

"Last night you wanted five hundred dollars not to send me back to Texas. How about that?"

"To hell wth Texas," Bream answered; "I can deal with you here."

"How about me working out that five hundred?" Rockwell countered. "You must have some kind of work for a man like me to do. Something where a man could make a quick piece of money."

Bream had a cold smile. "No. A little town marshal wouldn't be having jobs to offer big, quick money men like you. What makes you think I would?"

"Oh, it was just an idea," Rockwell answered. "You know, a man having irons in the fire outside his regular job."

"Not me," Bream said. "I'm satisfied with my little salary; I do my day's work and earn my night's sleep."

"That's a different story than the one you were trying to put over to me last night," Rockwell answered.

"And you're a different man from the man I thought I was talking to last night."

Willy Bream made his statement softly, but Rockwell noted how sharply the marshal's eyes bored into

his. Rockwell heard this bombshell burst and made every effort to keep from showing his surprise. "I don't understand you," he said. "I haven't changed my name since yesterday."

"No. Only your occupation! You sent word ahead of yourself that you were a Number One Bad Boy from Who Laid the Chunk. And it turns out that you're only a second rate Cattlemen's Association detective. A range detective and from what I judge, not a very good one at that."

THERE WAS silence in the jail a moment while Bream waited for this to sink in, and while Rockwell adjusted himself to the fact that Bream had learned all about him.

"Whether I am or not," Rockwell stalled, "is that any reason for you to keep me in jail? If you don't believe I'm wanted in Texas, then what are you holding me for?"

"Resisting arrest—just like I told you."

"I take it, then, that you haven't got any use for me in your business," Rockwell said.

"What business?"

"The business of heading up this gang that's trying to take over control of all this range around here."

"Oh, that!" Willy Bream said casually. "No, I don't reckon you'd do us much good under the circumstances. The fact is, I'm sure that things would be better if you weren't around at all; you're a trouble maker."

"Then if we can't do any business, I might as well be heading back for Texas."

"No, that wouldn't be practical," Bream answered. "You see, I couldn't depend on you actually going back to Texas. You might get lost in the mountains and pop up back here again."

Rockwell digested this a moment. "You're trying to tell me that you're going to have to get rid of me."

"That's right," Bream said. "I don't like a man to come so near to making a fool out of me as you did. I've got to prove to the boys that such tricks are a mistake; you see how it is."

"Yes, I see how it is. Well, why don't you do it and get it over? You might never have a better chance."

"It's not that easy," Willy Bream answered. "There are several things that have got to be thought of. I couldn't very well shoot you down here in the jail without drawing criticism from some of our better and less intelligent citizens. They might think it was not respectful to a visiting peace officer to shoot him while he was in jail and unarmed. And then, you've got a lot of ranchers around here thinking that you're a pretty good range detective, and you whip Dupree thinking you're a pretty good man. All them impressions has got to be corrected."

"How?"

"Well, they wouldn't still think you was much of a range detective if you was lying around in jail while they got half of their cattle stolen because they'd taken you're advice to close herd the stuff, would they? They'd have to come to the conclusion that they lost that stock because they'd taken your advice and that you lay around in jail while they got robbed. And then there's the matter of you getting the better of Dupree. He's an important front man in our organization, and it won't do for him to lose face. So, you see, he's got to take that whipping he got from you out of your hide, and reestablish himself in the eyes of his boys. After that, well, I don't reckon we'll have much more use for you. But in the meantime, just kind of make yourself at home, will you?"

Willy Bream got up from his chair and shoved it back. "Well, I've got a busy night ahead of me. See you tomorrow."

He blew out the oil lamp, and went out leaving Rockwell amazed that the man's egotism was so great that he could not help flaunting his own knowledge before his captive. The man simply could not resist an exhibition of his power, once he felt secure against the man who had almost tricked him.

ROCKWELL sat down on the bunk in the jail cell. He was half expecting to hear the footsteps of Mack, Hairpin and Fat Stuff. Then he felt a sickness in the pit of his stomach.

He had made it amply clear to those boys that he did not want to be rescued from jail.

He lay down on the bunk and stretched out. He was bone weary, his muscles cried out their exhaustion and pain. The pounding his head had taken gave him a terrific headache, and the swelling cuts and bruises on his face and body permitted him no comfort on the hard cot.

He lay in the darkness and carefully reviewed his every step since he had arrived in Juniper. These steps were not the result of a planned campaign, since Rhoda Metcalf had made it impossible for him to work out the plans he had made. In fact but for her interference, he would have been on the inside of Willy Bream's gang now, instead of in Willy Bream's jail awaiting Willy Bream's executioners.

He retraced his every step, recalled all his conversations, and his conclusions about the people he had met, and reexamined them. He traced his actions carefully down to this very moment. He had made his mistakes, due to the fact that he had to improvise new plans as he went along, but he had accomplished something.

Now he knew that Willy Bream was the brains of the trouble. He knew that Willy Bream wanted cattle that could be converted into money; he knew that Dupree's share would be the Box M—provided he could get it. He knew that Coulter was merely another buzzard hanging around where he might be able to find some pickings from the feasts of the two bigger men.

And he knew who the unknown quantity was; he could name the man who stayed in the background and who, if things kept on as they were going, would come out on top of them all. And that secret, that keystone to the whole trouble, Rockwell had learned by listening to Willy Bream.

But he had learned it too late to do anything about it. He would be lying here in jail, just as Bream had said, while the thieves made one of their biggest hauls, succeeding because the ranchers had followed Rockwell's advice.

He had never up to this time looked at a tomorrow and seen such a complete wreckage of his efforts. Well, a man had to fail sometimes, and this was his time, he decided; it would be a total failure, but one he would not live to face.

He had lay on the jail bunk about an hour when he heard somebody come in through the front door. His mind flashed to Hairpin and Fat Stuff, and he waited expectantly. Somebody scratched a match and lit the lamp on the desk, then Rockwell raised his head and looked out through the bars.

The entrant was Red Coulter.

Coulter came to the cell door and grinned at him. "Howdy, Officer," he greeted. "How's tricks?"

Rockwell laid his aching head back down on his bunk and ignored him.

"Cheer up," Red said. "You haven't anything to worry about for another twenty-four hours anyway. Willy sent me to keep you company. He's sorry he can't stay and entertain you, but he's got another appointment tonight, visiting some old friends of yours, the Hintons and Ed Bryant and the like. Big doings, tonight."

"So I heard," Rockwell answered. "I thought you'd be along."

"Somebody has to watch you," Red answered. "It's easier here watching you, and I get my cut just the same."

"Easy money," Rockwell answered. "It'll choke you some day."

"I like it that way," Red answered. "Easy come, easy go. Like that dinero you won from me. I didn't even miss it."

"You're not too good a card player," Rockwell answered.

"I don't know," Red answered. "I could beat you any time I had my mind set on it. I was thinking of other things when I let you grab them pots. In a way, I wish you was free, and I'd play you some head-on poker just to show you I was better than you."

"Well, I'm not, and maybe I won't be," Rockwell answered speculatively. He was silent a moment, then he added, as though talking to himself. "No, it wouldn't do. You haven't the guts; you're just a tinhorn."

"What do you mean?" Red snapped "Who's a tinhorn?"

"I was just thinking about a real poker game," Rockwell answered. "But you wouldn't be man enough to play that kind of a game."

COULTER GLARED at him. "I'm as much of a man as you."

"Not the kind of man I mean. I mean the kind of a gambler that's big enough to play an honest game for real big stakes. I don't mean money stakes; anybody can play for money. I mean taking a real chance. But forget it, you're not that kind of a crook; you're not big enough."

"How do you know?"

"I just see it in you. Dupree and Willy Bream, they're both honestly crooked, you're just a small time, dishonest crook. It takes a man to take real chances."

"You keep saying that. What's on your mind?"

"This is what I was thinking. A *real* poker game! I'm behind the eight ball; I'm not kidding myself that I'll still be alive another day. You know why I am here; I've got the deadwood on the bunch of you, and you don't know how much I know, or where you'd stand if I happen to get loose. There's some things about your outfit that I don't know. If I thought you were an honest enough crook, I'd offer to play you the most important poker game you ever played in your life. One like nobody ever played before, and may never play again. But you'd have to dig mighty deep to find enough honesty to play it—and it wouldn't give you any satisfaction if you played it any other way, because the only thing you'd win would be something inside yourself."

"You're talking riddles," Red answered impatiently. "What would we be playing for?"

"Information. We'd play a hand of showdown, and the winner would get to ask the other one any question he wanted to about what he knows about this business, and the other one would have to give him the right answer. If you couldn't tell the truth, it wouldn't interest you to play it because you wouldn't be risking anything, so you wouldn't get any satisfaction out of the game. A man would have to realize that he was risking something if he got any good out of the game."

"That's a hell of an idea," Red answered. "I don't see—" His voice trailed off; he scratched his head, and took a turn up and down the floor in front of the cell. "You know," he said after a while, "I never thought of a game like that. Hell, a man would really be risking something, wouldn't he? That would be real gambling—"

"Not unless you told the truth."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. Otherwise it would be just trying to see who could outlie the other man. That wouldn't mean much to a *real* gambler, would it?"

"You couldn't get much of a thrill out of it," Rockwell admitted.

Red took another few round trips in the jail corridor. "I don't see no fish-hook in it," he said. "What you learn won't do you no good unless you get out, and I'll see that you don't do that. And what I might learn will do me some good if you don't get out. You know—I'm going to take you up on that, mister. I'll play you some poker, and the stakes will be the answers to any questions the winner puts. I'll show you whether I'm a tinhorn or a real gambler."

13

WINNER TAKE ALL

COULTER WENT over to the table and shoved it up against the cell door. He got a pack of cards out of the table drawer, and pulled his chair up. He shuffled the cards, then slid them over to the edge of the table against the cell bars.

"Cut for deal," he said. "We'll play each hand for one question. Straight poker hands. Is that fair?"

"Fair enough," Rockwell answered.

He was sitting on the end of the bunk just inside the bars. He reached his hand through the bars and cut the cards and slid them back to Red. Red dealt out two poker hands face down, then laid the deck down. "What have you got?" he asked, picking his own hand up and examining it.

Rockwell examined his hand, handling it through the bars. He laid the cards face up. "No pairs, King high," he said.

"Pair of deuces," Red said, and laid his hand down face up, showing the small pair.

"You win," Rockwell said. "You've got a question coming."

"I already know all about you being a range detective," Red said. "Who sent for you?"

"Getting down to the meat quick, aren't you?" Rockwell grinned at him. "Ed Bryant made the arrangements."

"I heard that already," Red grinned back. "I was checking to see if you were really going to be honest. Say, you know a man could play this for higher stakes than any amount of money he could name, couldn't he? Risking his life, probably."

'Sure," Rockwell answered. "There aren't many men that are real gamblers enough at heart to play for such stakes. Cheating is not gambling; that's just petty thievery. A gambler can respect himself, but a petty card thief can't; see the difference?"

"You know, I never looked at it that way before," Red answered. "You've really got something. Your deal."

Rockwell sat on his bunk and dealt the cards with his arms thrust through the bars. He picked up his hand, sorted it and found no pairs. "No pairs. Ace high," he announced. throwing the cards down face up.

"Three eights," Red said. "Wish I'd got them later when I needed 'em more. Well, I win again." He studied a moment. "How come you to figger I was tied in with this rustling? I mean, what evidence have you got against me?"

"I haven't any evidence against you—yet. Only circumstances, but they were plenty easy. You gamble with too hot a crowd for a thirty-a-month cowpoke; you worked for a brand that was losing money, but run with a crowd that spends too much. Therefore, you were running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. That don't convict you in a court of law, but it shows a detective where to start looking for his evidence."

Red grinned. "Say, I like this game," he said. "But I don't see what you figure on getting out of it."

"When a man fails to finish a job, like I failed in this one, he likes to know where his mistakes were. Likes to know what he missed finding that he should have found. I'd just like to know what is really happening here, and I'm willing to gamble to find out."

"Hell, what you learn won't do you no good now. My deal," Red answered, and dealt out two more hands.

Rockwell won this one with a pair of Jacks against nothing. Red said, "Okay, mister. Fire away."

"Who killed old Bob Metcalf?" Rockwell shot the question at him with a seeming casualness.

Red's eyes bulged; he had a struggle with himself.

Rockwell had the feeling that the man was going to renege on his deal. He said softly to Red, "It takes a real man to play this game, don't it, Red?"

THAT DID it. "And I'm man enough to play it," Red said. "Willy Bream killed Metcalf. I set him up for Willy by telling him that I knew where a little bunch of his stolen stock was hidden up in the mountains. Willy was waiting for him with a rifle when we got there." He could not help adding, as though he enjoyed talking, now that he had tasted it, "Willy can kill a man in colder blood than any person I ever saw; the gent ain't human! Your deal."

Red was sweating, but he was hooked in such a game as he had never played before, and with the fever running high, he went at it eagerly. Rockwell dealt and won again. "Bream's the big brain of the outfit, isn't he?"

"Sure," Red answered. "I told you that out at Box M, but you didn't believe me. He's the boss, but only because the rest are afraid of him. It's going to be a fight after they get their hands on this range. And I'm going to have a hand in that, too; I'm not doing all this for just chicken feed. My deal."

Red won his deal, and asked, "How was you figuring on trapping us?"

"I sent that dodger ahead of me to try to work my way into the bunch, and get the evidence on you that way," Rockwell answered.

"That's what I figured," Red said. "Boy, Willy would have had a hemorrhage if you'd got away with that! Your deal."

Rockwell dealt and won, and asked, "What's that 'Big Doings' the gang is out on tonight?"

"Just like I told you," Red answered. "You told your friends to round up their yearlings and keep them corraled close to their houses. Willy is taking every man he can scrape up, and sending four of 'em to each ranch to lift those herds you was kind enough to round up for us. My deal."

Rockwell won again, and asked, "Where's he taking them?"

Red wiped his sweating face. "I didn't realize a game like this could be so tough. Well, he's got a mountain valley ranch up on the east side of Pinetop. He takes the stuff there, where a crew of his reworks the brands, and then drives them on down to the Indian Agency at Kiowa where the Commissary Officer buys 'em and takes a cutback for not checking brands too careful."

"And is Willy's tip-off man among the honest ranchers?" Rockwell asked.

"No you don't!" Red grinned at him. "That's another question. You'll have to win that answer like you did the rest. Your deal."

"Forget it," Rockwell said. "I already know the answer to that one. Just checking on my guess."

The front door of the jail opened slowly while Rockwell was shuffling the cards, and the fat body of old John Brown walked in. He had a tray with two sandwiches and a cup of coffee on it, and he came across the floor on his big, carpet-slippered feet.

Red said, "What the hell do you want?"

"Rockwell missed his supper tonight," Brown answered. "He paid for it, and he gets it. Open up that cell door."

"I ain't opening no cell door, you big ape. Stick it through the cracks if you want to."

Rockwell reached his hand out and one at a time Brown handed him the coffee cup and each of the sandwiches Rockwell taking each and laying it down beside him on the cot before reaching for the other.

Then old John Brown turned and waddled out.

Red said, "I never seen that old codger give that kind of service to anybody before."

"He must like me," Rockwell an-

swered, picking up the coffee cup and drinking it down. He picked up one of the egg sandwiches and ate it, and then picked the other one up.

He had noticed when he took it that it was much heavier than an egg sandwich could ever be. Now he lifted it with both hands. "It's my deal," he said, "but you deal for me."

Red dealt the cards while Rockwell handled his sandwich. "Turn my hand face up," Rockwell said. Red turned both hands face up and announced. "You've got deuces. I've got eights. I win."

"No, you don't, Red. The game is over! I win; take the keys out of the drawer and open my cell door."

RED LOOKED up, and his mouth dropped open. Rockwell had the small double-barreled Derringer he had taken from the egg sandwich pointed squarely between Red's eyes. The distance from the gun to Red's head was about two feet. "Red," he said, "You have the makings of an honest crook in you. Don't make me have to blow your head off before you get started on your new career."

Red kept his hands carefully on the table, his fingers spread among the playing cards. He looked at the gun muzzle for a long moment, then his grin came back to him.

"All right, Rockwell," he said. "I was wrong; you win this hand."

"Then keep your hands in sight while you get those keys and open this cell."

Red grinned ruefully as he got the keys and opened the cell door. Rockwell lifted Red's gun, and the latter said, "I suppose I might as well step into the cell without waiting for you to tell me to."

"Yes, and it might be a lucky break for you, at that. I'm going out to the Big Doings."

He locked the cell door on Red and put the keys in his pocket, then started out. Red called to him through the bars. "Rockwell," he said. "I just want to tell you, win or lose, I never enjoyed a poker game as much in my life, and I don't feel so bad about losing to you. I kinda learned something, if I live to profit by it. I'm kinda getting to like you. I don't know why, though, unless it's because you've got more raw guts than anybody I ever met. I wish—" he paused a moment, then finished. "Aw, what the hell. Go on, and have your good time."

Rockwell said, "I'll see you, Red," and went up to John Brown's where he got Brown out of bed and threw him the jail keys.

"I want you to give Red his breakfast, and see that no mob grabs him off. Will you?"

The fat man stood in his door in a nightshirt that reminded Rockwell of a circus tent. He looked at the keys in his hand and said musingly, "Me a jailor! I must be losing my mind."

"No you're not, you old hyena; you've got a yen to be respectable in your old age, but you're a little ashamed of it. Otherwise, you wouldn't have slipped me that gun."

"What gun?" John Brown asked with a bland look on his face.

"See you later," Rockwell answered.

He handed the old man Red's gun, then went down to *The Rest* to pick up his own weapon. Most of the customers were gone, but Hairpin and Fat Stuff and Mack Farley were still sitting around a table with an almost empty bottle of whiskey and three glasses on it. Mack Farley had his chin on his chest and was snoring. Hairpin was trying to tell Fat Stuff something, but was having trouble talking without falling asleep.

Rockwell got his gun from the sleepy bartender and went over to the table, and only then did Hairpin see him.

Rockwell said, "Why haven't you scissorbills gone home?"

Hairpin said, "She'd chase the hide off of us if we did. She said wait for you, and we done waited. She

wouldn't let us come home without you, and you wouldn't let us stick with you. Orphans of the storm, that's what we are. It's as worse a storm as that one down in Texas when—"

"Tell me about it later," Rockwell said. "Can you ride?"

Hairpin straightened up his body in offended dignity and looked at Rockwell. "Me ride a horse?" he repeated. "Mercy, no! I wouldn't get close to one of them mean brutes. They'd bite a man."

Rockwell shook Farley awake and told him, "There's going to be a raid on four or five ranches tonight. It's probably already going on. You head for Box M, and bring every man you've got over to Ed Bryant's. And don't stop to tangle with anybody if you bump into them. I want everybody together. Now, help me pour Hairpin into his saddle. I'll take him and Fat Stuff with me."

Hairpin asked groggily. "What's that about a fight?"

"You'll get plenty of it tonight! You'll get a good one!"

Hairpin lifted himself up from the table with his hands, took a last swig from the bottle, then let out a whoop. "Ye-o-w! Injuns! Circle the wagons, boys! The 'Paches are comin'!"

He lit out of the saloon in a staggering run, with the rest of them following him.

The bartender shouted at Rockwell. "Hey, wait a minute. You owe me fourteen dollars and fifty cents."

"What for?"

"For these boys' drinks. They said you'd pay the bill. Twelve dollars for whiskey, and two-fifty for cigars."

Rockwell went back and paid the bar bill, then went out and joined them at the horses. "Hairpin, I want you to stop by every ranch on the left road, and Fat Stuff, you take the right road. Tell them all to meet me at Ed Bryant's as quick as they can get there, with every hand they've got."

14

BIG DOIN'S

IT WAS well after midnight when the neighboring ranchers began to join Rockwell at Ed Bryant's place. The men sat around outside the house in the dark, while Rockwell told them what had happened since he had seen them about twelve hours before. "One thing that strikes me as funny," Marvin Lucas said, "is how Willy Bream manages to know every move we make."

"I'll show you that before the night is over," Rockwell promised, "Provided we have any luck. Do you men know where there's a ranch on the east side of Pinetop Mountain?"

"Yes," Bryant said, "A man named Joshua or something used to have a hillside spread up there."

"That's Willy Bream's place now," Rockwell said. "That's where your yearlings go when they leave here. From there they go to the Indian Agency with a re-worked hair-brand on them."

Fat Stuff rode up with half a dozen men and reported, "I got everybody but McElroy. His corral is empty, so I reckon he's already out on the warpath. Has Hairpin showed up yet?"

"Yes, he's around," Rockwell answered. "Well, men, here's your news. Willy Bream is staging a big wholesale on all of you tonight. He's probably already picked up any yearlings you men corraled and has 'em headed toward his place at Pinetop. I didn't send this word to you men separately, because I wanted him to get the stuff up to his place. He'll be using practically all the men who are tied up with him. So, we'll all get a chance to catch the whole bunch of them right in the

act. That ought to crack it wide open."

"This is the day I've been waiting for, for more than a year," Lucas said. "Let's get started."

Five horses came up from the front gate, and Jim Rockwell saw that Rhoda Metcalf had come along with Farley and three other men. She dismounted and came up to Rockwell. "When do we start?"

"I'm sorry," he answered. "But this is men's work. You'd better stay there with Mary Bryant; we can take care of it."

"Maybe you can," the girl answered sharply. "But I asked you to stay and help me, and you wouldn't. And do you know what happened? Somebody shot at me through my window tonight, shot at me just as if I were a man. If I hadn't stooped at that moment to pick up a spool of thread I'd have been dead right now, killed by a bushwhacker's bullet. If they're treating me like a man then I'm not going to sit idly back and let other people do my fighting for me. I'm not going to hang around my house and be a target for anybody that wants to stand outside my window and shoot at me."

"Are you sure about that?" Rockwell asked. "Maybe they thought it was one of your men."

"Do my men walk around in my bed room with a woman's nightgown on?" she countered.

"Then you know the bushwhacker saw you?"

"Of course he didn't see me! Do you think I get ready for bed with my window blinds up? He saw my shadow on the window shade, and he put a hole in it. And I've got the bullet to prove it; I dug it out of the door casing opposite the window."

"Let me see it," Rockwell said.

She handed him the bullet and he looked at it. "Doesn't that prove it?" she demanded.

"It proves you've got a forty-O-four rifle bullet," he answered, returning it to her.

"You mean that you don't believe I was shot at?"

"I hardly expected just that," he answered, "I thought you'd be killed so it would look like an accident. Fire or runaway horse, or something. But I believe you; hang on to that bullet."

SHE SEEMED stunned. "You knew all along that I was likely to be killed, and you went off and left me alone?"

"I didn't know it until after I left, and besides you weren't alone. I'd suggest that you stay here with Mary Bryant while we're gone; it will be safer for you."

"I am running a ranch that's losing cattle, just the same as the rest of these people. I'm sending my men along to help, and I wouldn't send them where I wouldn't go myself."

"Are you sure that's why you're coming along?" Rockwell asked dryly. "Or do you just want to see some of your enemies die?"

The girl's teeth clicked together. "Who wouldn't want to see an end to this business?" she snapped. "Besides, this is a free country, and I can ride anywhere I want to at any time I want to."

Rockwell shrugged and walked away from her, joining Bryant. "We're ready, I guess. I want a word with all of them before we start."

When the men gathered around him, Rockwell spoke to them. "This is your country, men. You have no law here, and I'm not an official representative of the law. My job is to show you who's making you your trouble and how. I hope I can finish doing that when we get up there in the mountains. When I've done that, I'll be glad to go on helping you, not as a law officer, but just to help you clean it up. What you do with these men if we're lucky enough to catch them is up to you. As I say, you, the honest ranchers of this community, are the only law you've got; you'd better decide now what you want to do."

Bryant answered first. "Nobody likes to do what we've got to do, but there's only one thing you can

do when people are robbing you blind. Break it up, and see that it can't happen again. At least, not with the same people."

"That's my prescription," Lucas added.

"Anybody think differently?" Rockwell asked, and there was no answer. "All right—then we break it up. Bryant, you lead the way. I'll be along with you."

It was a grim bunch of riders who mounted their animals in the moonlight out by Ed Bryant's corrals, and headed straightway toward the foot of Pinetop Mountain. There was little talk as they rode, and almost the only sound in the moonlit night was the thump of horses' hooves and the musical jingle or spur chains and the creaking of saddle leather. The moon was high and white, and a cool breeze came off the mountains. It was beautiful; it was terrible.

Rhoda Metcalf rode determinedly along the end of the procession with her men.

They rode to the limit of Bryant's land, then crossed Rhoda Metcalf's range, coming after an hour of riding to the line of trees which started at the foot of the mountain. Rockwell and Bryant were riding ahead, with some twenty men and the girl trailing along.

Rockwell pulled his horse up suddenly, saying to Bryant, "Hold it."

They raised their hands and stopped the column. Rockwell laid his eyes on the line of deeper darkness a hundred yards ahead.

"There's a man there," he said in an undertone.

"I thought I saw him," Bryant answered.

Then they saw that the man was emerging from the trees and riding toward them. They stood fast while he approached, and then the man called out, "Bryant?"

"Yeah."

"This is McElroy," the man announced, and rode up to them. "My, I'm glad to see you."

"What's the trouble?" Bryant asked.

"I tangled with them—the mountain men. Almost got caught."

"How did it happen?" Rockwell asked.

"Like I told you this afternoon, I'd drove my yearlings up to a small feed pasture just back of my house so I could watch them. About midnight I went out to take a look, and they was gone. I never heard a thing. Well, I saddled up and started trailing, and I ended right about here. I was pretty close behind them, I reckon, and I started to follow 'em into the woods trail, when somebody cuts down on me with a rifle. I shot back at 'em, but you couldn't see nobody in the woods."

"How'd you manage to keep from getting hit?"

McElroy chuckled. "I lit a shuck for the woods myself, and stuck around there in the dark till I seen you all comin' up. It's dark in there, and I was safe."

"Lucky you didn't get killed," Bryant said. "That's why Fat Stuff didn't find you at home; you're in time to join the party, I reckon."

Rockwell said, "I'll tell you. Let's talk this over. Get down a minute, gents?" He was dismounting, and the two ranchers also got out of their saddles.

ROCKWELL said, "Mind if I look at your rifle, McElroy? That's a heavy gun."

"Yeah. Bought it for bear." He handed the rifle to Rockwell.

Rockwell sniffed the barrel.

McElroy said, "Say, what's this? You ain't doubtin' my word, are you?"

"Yes," Rockwell answered, "I am. Just hand me your pistol, will you, while we get some things cleared up."

"Are you plumb crazy?" McElroy growled. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"I'll tell you then," Rockwell answered. "Remember when I first saw you? You were up at the stage station in the mountains having a confab with John Dupree. You're one of the bunch that claims to hate

Dupree; how come you met him up there where you wouldn't be likely to run into any of your neighbors?"

"Look here, mister," McElroy answered roughly, "I don't have to answer any such damn fool questions, but I will explain to my friends. I didn't meet Dupree there; I was up there looking for strays and stopped there to get some dinner. Dupree rode in, and him and me got into an argument. I accused him of being mixed up with them mountain men in stealing my stuff. Everybody knows that he will steal everything he can get his hands or rope on. I threatened to hire gun hands to drive him out of Juniper. You ought to remember him telling me not to hire gunhands."

"I do," Rockwell admitted, "but I think it was for another purpose. Anyhow, who shot at Rhoda Metcalf through her window tonight?"

"How would I know?"

"You're her uncle; when she's in trouble, you'd be the natural man to look after her, wouldn't you?"

"Ordinarily," McElroy admitted, "but the fact is, she wouldn't let me help her. I offered to, but she wouldn't have it; she thinks she's as good a man as any of us."

"And because you couldn't work from the inside, you stood outside her window and shot at her. Is that it?"

"You're a damned fool," McElroy answered. "I won't even answer that question."

"But somebody shot at her with a forty-O-four rifle; you've got the only rifle of that odd size around here, and it has been shot recently."

"I told you what I shot at; why should I want to kill my own sister's child?"

"Who would get her hundred thousand acres of land and ten thousand cattle if she died?" Rockwell asked evenly.

"Why—I don't know—I guess it would go to—"

"It would go to you; you're her nearest relative. You never even thought of that, did you? McElroy, I want you to hand me your gun."

"You're crazy. You're just making a lot of guesses that put me in a bad light. I don't know why—"

"I'll tell you why. This afternoon Bryant told all you folks who I actually was. I came along and even told you my plan to trick Willy Bream. I had hardly got through when you rode off toward town—and nobody else from that crowd went to town. Then when I got there, Willy knew who I was and knew every word that was said out there. McElroy, you told him; you're the only one of this bunch of ranchers that has an interest in seeing things change around here, and you're the only one who could have got to Bream with the facts."

"Everything you say is a pack of lies," McElroy said gruffly. "You ain't got any reason at all to think I'm mixed up with that gang."

"Then what were you doing coming down from their hideout? I'll answer for you; Bream had every man he's got working tonight. You were with him and you're hurrying home so you won't be missed. You boys knew it was getting hot, and you were afraid you couldn't explain your absence from home on a night like this. McElroy, I want your gun. If you don't hand it over, I'll have to presume that you'll shoot me when I tell you this next bit of news."

"What news?" McElroy asked with an eagerness that he could not control.

"I've got Red Coulter in jail. He's just small potatoes in this business, and he told me a lot of things; do you want your neighbors to hear what he told me?"

McELROY lowered his head a moment in thought, and when he raised it he was drawing his pistol. He had it lifting toward Rockwell when Bryant lifted his foot and kicked it out of his hand. Then Bryant himself took his own gun out and kept it on McElroy. "And I neighbored a man like you," he said disgustedly.

The whole group of riders had gradually dismounted and now they

made a circle around the captive. Rockwell said to Rhoda Metcalf, "Will you show that bullet to Bryant?"

"I certainly will," she answered, and handed the bullet over.

Bryant took the bullet and examined it while Rockwell ejected a live shell from McElroy's rifle, and handed the shell to Bryant. Bryant studied them both a long moment, then passed them to Lucas, who in turn passed them on to the other silent men.

Rockwell squatted on a heel and rolled a cigarette. This, he was thankful, was not his affair. He had gone through much of this kind of thing in his day, and it was a depressing business, but it was a thing that had to be done.

Bryant asked the girl, "You'll swear that this was the bullet that was fired at you tonight?"

"Yes," the girl answered. "If you want to go and see the bullet hole in the glass, it is still there."

Bryant looked at his neighbors and said, "Well?"

Lucas said, "We can't make no exceptions; it's a bad thing for us all, but that's the way it has to be."

Ed Bryant got a rope off his saddle, and they led J. D. McElroy a hundred feet to a big oak tree, and there they put him on his horse with his hands tied behind him.

McElroy broke. "Rhoda," he cried. "You're letting them do this to me. Tell 'em you're wrong. You know it wasn't me—"

"Shut up," the girl snapped. "I know it was you! You've been whining around me ever since my father was killed, trying to borrow, trying to get me to let you run my place, trying to buy it without money—I was ashamed to tell it about a relative, but I'm more ashamed of you now. At least you can take your punishment like a man; why don't you confess and get it off your conscience?"

McElroy did not face death like a man. "All right," he whined "I told 'em things, and Willy Bream made me ride with them tonight."

He poured out his confession, trying to show his neighbors that he had acted in fear of Bream, the man who had thought up the idea of the three of them acting together and later dividing the spoils. He spoke eagerly, hoping that his confession would gain him leniency. "I'll ride out of the country," he pleaded.

"You should have done that before," Bryant answered. "It is too late now."

Rockwell turned and walked away while they threw the rope over the limb of the tree. He heard somebody slap McElroy's horse with a hat, heard the sudden running feet of the animal—and the grim silence then settled over the crowd as they walked back to their horses.

Rockwell sometimes hated his business, and it was at times like this he hated it most.

15

PAYOFF

AFTER AN awkward interval of time during which the men were strangely silent, each wrapped in his own grim thoughts and speculations, Rockwell looked at the sky and said, "We'd better get going, boys, before the moon sets."

They mounted and with Bryant and Rockwell in the lead, they made a silent procession toward the timber and entered the darkened trail. Here was Bryant's job. He knew these mountains, and he guided them up the steep and twisting way, around boulders, through overgrowth which shut out the moon in and out of patches of moonlight, silently over beds of pine humus, but always upward.

They came at last to a point where Bryant pulled his mount to a halt and passed the word for silence down the line. The trail here ran between

a tall bluff on the high side and a steep cliff dropping sharply off to a gurgling ravine on the other.

"We get around this bluff and we're facing a flat grassy bench," Bryant explained. "The trail runs along the bluff past a fenced pasture—maybe twenty acres—to the house, less than a quarter of a mile from that turn of the bluff right ahead of us. If they're working the brands on that stuff, they should be in this near pasture. Wait a minute."

Bryant got down from his horse and put his ear to the ground, listening for some time. "There's some movement," he said, getting to his feet. "It may be just the cattle, or it may be men working them. I can't tell. You're the fighting man—what do you say?"

"Since we don't know what we're facing, we'd better go in on the run. Don't give them a chance to get in balance. If they're not there, keep running and hit the house. If it's a false alarm, nothing's lost, that way."

"Then we run in," Bryant said, and walked along back the line of horsemen and gave the word. He came back and mounted, then said, "Well, let's get it over."

Lucas pulled up closer and asked, "Want to take any prisoners?"

"What for?" Bryant snapped. "I don't need any, myself."

"Okay, then. No prisoners," Lucas answered, and dropped back, passing the word along to the rear.

Bryant pulled his rifle out of its saddleboot and injected a shell into the chamber, replacing it with a new one in the magazine. He slid his pistol up and down in its holster to see that it was sliding free.

Rockwell shoved a shell into the empty chamber that his hammer usually rested on, stuck the gun in his waistband instead of its holster, then passed the word over his shoulder:

"Let's go, men!"

THE VALLEY ranchers plunged forward through the darkness, spurring their horses into a run, silent except for the creak of their leather and the pounding of hooves on the soft turf. They quickly reached the high point of the bluff and rounded it, coming out into moonlight on the grassy bench.

The silver light showed them a group of men working cattle beside a small branding fire not two hundred yards ahead of them. Now the thunder of their horses' hooves announced their coming, and Rockwell, throwing caution aside, shouted, "Spread right and left! Fire when you're ready."

Somebody at the branding fire set up a shout, and it was followed with a succession of quick shots from the rustlers. Rockwell's men let go with a long fusillade of rifle shots without slowing down their running horses. The close herded yearlings broke and scattered, spooked by the shots. They would run circles in that twenty-acre meadow until they were unwound.

The ranchers tore straight toward the fire and the small clump of horses, filling the night with the roar of their weapons and the flashes of their muzzle flame. Shouts answered shouts, the roar of guns was a blending of the sharp crack of rifles and duller—sounding hollowing of handguns.

"They're heading for their horses," Rockwell shouted. "Pin 'em down!"

Hairpin let out an Indian screech and bent over his horse's neck holding his rifle high. Fat Stuff bounced along behind him, whooping and shouting and firing his rifle as fast as he could lever shells into it.

They bore down on the rustlers in a cloud of gunsmoke slashed with orange muzzle flame. The dust rolled up under pounding hooves and dulled the moonlight, leaving the mad inferno of fighting wrapped in a biting dry haze which tightened around them and hid them from each other.

Rockwell pushed himself straight into the middle of it, no longer trying to direct the men he could not see and who could not have heard his voice in the noises of the battle. Gunsmoke bit his nostrils, and the dust choked him.

He came up against a horseman trying for a getaway. The man's horse reared snorting and came down

with his front feet astride the neck of Rockwell's animal. Rockwell's horse went to his knees, and the rustler's horse stumbled and pawed the earth trying to right himself.

The rustler was trying to keep his horse on his feet, and handle his gun simultaneously. He fired hastily at Rockwell, missing by a good margin. Rockwell shot him dead. The man's horse bucked the sagging figure of its rider off, and set out into the distance.

Rockwell turned his own horse and pulled back into the middle of things, which were still centered around the dull embers of the trampled campfire. Here was where the yelling was loudest; here was where the guns boomed with a rolling thunder; here were the screams of the dying.

A horseman cut across in front of him, a vague shadow in the dust-filled night. Rockwell got one look at the massive figure and wheeled his horse toward the man who was heading away from the thick of it.

John Dupree, a blob of white bandages where his left hand should be, was pulling out of the fight, leaving the rest of them to carry it on!

Rockwell spurred his animal toward the point where Dupree's figure was swallowed up by the darkness, and set his course in the same direction of Dupree's. Gradually they came out of the swirl of dust and Rockwell saw Dupree racing toward the tall ranchhouse standing with its back to the bluff.

IT WAS A fast quarter of a mile race, and when Dupree slid off his animal in front of the house, he stopped to tie the horse beside another one at the hitchrail out in front of the door. Rockwell was convince that in his speed, and with the sound of the battle behind him, Dupree had not known that Rockwell was following him. He was convinced of it when Dupree finished tying and started walking toward the house without looking behind him.

Rockwell came on horseback to within less than seventy-five yards of him, and slid out of his saddle on the move. Then he called out, "Hold it, Dupree."

He left his horse ground hitched and kept going toward Dupree, and now in the clear moonlight he could see that Dupree had his left hand bandaged and hung from a sling around his neck.

Rockwell said to him, "All right, Dupree, you can finish killing me whenever you're ready."

Dupree had stopped still and turned around when Rockwell first called to him, and now he stood a moment as though it took him a moment to recognize Rockwell.

He said, "It's you again!"

Then he started running directly toward Rockwell and pulling his gun as he ran, as though he had to get as close to his tormentor as possible to make his shots more effective.

He lifted his gun and fired as he ran. He shot three times before he seemed to realize that he was doing it wrong. He stopped dead in his tracks and lifted his gun with a slow motion and started bringing it down carefully, precisely.

Rockwell shot him before the gun in Dupree's hand dropped down to level. The impact of Rockwell's lead made a separate sound as it drilled Dupree's chest. Dupree's knees buckled quickly and he fell, but he caught his weight on his hands. He doubled a leg up under him and pushed himself up to his feet, standing momentarily with his gun hanging downward in his hand. He looked around and then located Rockwell, and lifted his gun again slowly.

Rockwell shot him in the head this time, and when he fell he did not move again.

Rockwell stepped over to him and gave him a closer scrutiny, saw that he was dead, and promptly forgot him. He turned and started up the steps of the ranchhouse, and a voice inside asked suspiciously, "What's the trouble, John?"

It was Willy Bream's voice.

Rockwell made an unintelligible sound intended to delay Bream's recognition of him for a moment while he continued across the porch.

Bream's normally high-pitcher

voice came again, higher up the scale, sharp and fast. "Who's that? Who's that?"

Rockwell kept coming, and he heard the sudden shuffle of feet as Willy Bream retreated farther back into his darkened house. Rockwell surged forward suddenly and entering the door, jumped aside with his back to the wall. A spurt of gunflame came from across the room, and a bullet whined out the door.

"Willy," Rockwell said, "The party's over for you around here. Do you want to go along and give yourself up to Bryant and his friends?" He took a couple of steps aside on silent feet as he spoke.

Willy Bream fired again at the sound of his voice. The bullet made a splintering sound as it hit the log wall where Rockwell had been standing.

"All right," Rockwell answered. "If you want it this way, it suits me. Do you want to come outside so we can see what we're doing?"

Willy Bream wasted another shot, but still did not speak. Then it came to Rockwell that Bream was playing it smart. Nobody had yet seen him here, nobody could identify him as one of the rustlers. If Bream could kill Rockwell and get away, he'd be as much in the clear as he ever had been. He'd still be the marshal of Juniper.

Willy Bream would not be doing any talking now.

ROCKWELL slid along the wall silently and came abruptly against a side table. He ran his left hand along the tabletop and his fingers touched a one-pound coffee tin, such as men in bunkhouses use for generous-sized ash trays. He picked it up and retreated two paces away from the table. Bream would know the table's location exactly.

Then he tossed the tin back onto the table and it slid across the tabletop, with a sound that might have been made by Rockwell's having accidentally upset the table.

That did it.

Willy Bream fired recklessly toward the table's location, his gun flashing reddish-blue flame in the darkness across the room. Out of line with Bream's stream of lead, Rockwell place one shot breast high to the left of the muzzle flash.

He heard Willy Bream grunt as the bullet drilled home, and the sound of Bream collapsing. He heard the rattle of Bream's gun on the floor. Bream was making sounds in his throat, then he managed a full word. "Don't."

Rockwell did not trust the man. He followed the wall of the room around until he came on silent feet to the point where he had heard Bream fall. Then keeping his gun ready, he scratched a match with his left hand and dropped it with the same sweeping motion. The tiny flaming match fell in the lap of Willy Bream, sitting with his back to the wall and his pistol out of reach. Then Rockwell lit another match and held it.

Bream's head had dropped to his chest. There was a slight bubbling sound coming out of his mouth as he tried to breathe, and blood dripped from his lips. He gradually slid over sideways until he was lying on the floor. His legs straightened out, he rolled over onto his back with a convulsive motion. And then Willy Bream died.

Rockwell went out and sat down on the porch and rolled a cigarette. He was exhausted, and his spirits were at low ebb. He always had this kind of reaction after a big fight. Affairs like this showed up the worst in human nature, in the criminals he pursued, and too often in the very people he was fighting for. It always puzzled and disgusted him, this greed and hatred that made men steal and kill, and made good men turn into vindicative animals when their possessions were in jeopardy.

There was no more shooting down on the meadow now, but he heard horses and voices approaching, and he saw their dark forms in the moonlight as the party came toward the house. They came up, some on horseback and some afoot bringing a handful of prisoners—men whose very trudging postures indicated that they

knew that they had reached the end of their trails.

He found Bryant and said, "That's Dupree lying out there by the tree; Willy Bream is dead in the front room. Red Coulter is not a key figure but if you see him around, though, I'd suggest you shoot him on sight. I'm going to town."

He did not want to stay and see six men hanging from the limbs of the trees in the moonlight. That grim business was not his, it was part of the hard duty of men who were building homes for themselves while they waited for civilization to catch up with them.

HE STARTED toward his horse when a lone rider came up from across the meadow. It was Rhoda Metcalf, and she must have stayed in the woods until after the battle, and then come along later.

She dismounted near Rockwell just as he picked up his reins and prepared to mount his horse. "Are they hanging the prisoners yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," he answered.

"Aren't you staying to see it?" she asked.

"No!" His answer was edged, explosive.

She was silent in thought a moment, then asked, "You'll be back?"

"No."

She dropped her horse's reins and came over and stood near him in the moonlight. She dropped a hand on his sleeve, and her voice took on a softness. "Jim," she said, "why don't you stay? You and I could make Box M the biggest thing in the Territory. It's—it's a lonely job for a woman Jim. You could—"

Rockwell gathered his reins tight, put his hands on the cantel and horn of his saddle, his foot in a stirrup. "You'll manage to get along someway," he said, and climbed into his saddle and headed for town.

He reached Juniper just as the sun burst over the mountains, and he went to the hotel and found old John Brown waddling around in pants and undershirt, boiling coffee and frying eggs in the kitchen.

"Give me those jail keys, John," he said, "and fry up two baits of that henfruit. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Down at the jail he found Red Coulter asleep in the bunk, and woke him up. "You look like you've been having bad dreams," he said.

Red found his grin, and said, "No, sir. I reckon this is the first decent night's sleep I had since I stole my first calf."

"How much money have you got in your pocket?" Rockwell asked.

Red ruefully pulled out a few coins. "A dollar and a quarter."

Rockwell handed him a twenty dollar gold piece. "That's more than I started out in life with; come on down and eat before you ride," he said.

They were walking toward the hotel in the fresh morning light when Red said, "Say, I won that last pot fair and square. I got a question coming to me for that."

"I guess you're right," Rockwell admitted.

"Well, what's the answer to this business?"

Rockwell told him. "And I also recommended that if they laid eyes on you again they should shoot you on sight; think you can keep out of Juniper or do you want to wait around and play second-fiddle to some future Willy Bream?"

"I was thinking last night," Red said, "there's all kinds of ways to gamble. A man could get a kick out of gambling on whether he could make money raising cattle of his own. You gamble your life on your ideas of right and wrong."

"You've got the idea," Rockwell answered.

AFTER breakfast he had a cigar out on the hotel porch with John Brown, and watched Red Coulter ride into the hills, heading toward a new life somewhere. He told John Brown what had taken place. He had a reason for this; John Brown had a small hand in the affair, even though he had been a little ashamed of siding the law, and Rockwell wanted to boost the old man's

feeling of satisfaction at the performance of a right act. Old John Brown hadn't had much experience along that line.

When he was finished, old John said, half reluctantly, "I could have told you all about that set-up."

"I know you could have, but you wouldn't," Rockwell laughed. "This is good country around here, John; good place for a man to live. It's worth cleaning up."

He was thinking of Rhoda Metcalf's fine ranch, and the comfortable living that would go to the man that she married. A man wouldn't marry her: she'd marry a man. In twenty years she would be a "figure"; in fifty she would be a "legend".

And then there was Mary Bryant, with her quiet dignity and her beautiful simplicity, and with her strong dislike of the necessary hardness of the country, her shunning of its necessary cruelty... There was a woman... Yes, there was a woman, but she could never bring herself to love a man who lived by the violence she hated... A gentle girl like that, married to a range detective, never knowing when he would go, nor when he would be brought back in a pine box... No, she didn't deserve a thing like that.

Rockwell threw his cigar stump away and got to his feet. "I'm going to get some sleep before I start back," he told Brown. "See you later."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Western Action, published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass. for October 1, 1949.
State of New York)
County of New York) ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Western Action and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Sreet, New York 13, N.Y.; Managing editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Business manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street; New York 13, N.Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, New York 13, N.Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is — (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1949. Maurice Coyne (My commission expires March 30, 1950). (SEAL)

It was a kid and he was pretty scared . . .

LURE OF THE GRASS SEA

by BASIL WELLS

It looked as if Sile Wasson had collected what was due him in that redskin raid, but Jonas Beam couldn't be entirely sure that Wasson was dead . . .

THE LEFT eyelid of Jonas Beam flickered open—and closed quickly as a red surge of pain flooded through his skull. He groaned and rolled over on his side, his limbs oddly flaccid and numb. He bit back at the agony, and his eyes slitted open again.

A long moment passed. Beam sat up. His stubby fingers went up to his naked skull and withdrew swiftly as they encountered long blood-scabbed welts. So that's why his ears were ringing and every motion made him wince with pain.

The mule and the bony horse he'd ridden from Pennsylvania were gone, and with them most of his camping equipment. Even his traps and the long-barreled muzzle-loader his Pop brought from Pittsburgh had vanished. And the dull gray ashes of the fire were long dead.

"Blast that dirty pirate!" Jonas croaked weakly through his flaming red beard. "Once I lay board of Sile Wasson he'll rue the day he tackled me."

Beam's field of vision widened until now he could see the shielding grove where he had camped the night before, and off to the north the rutted broadness of the trail along the North Platte's valley. Grazing close by were the three nannies Beam had some-

how managed to bring West with him.

The round little man's face brightened. Here at least was food, and when he was recovered from the treacherous blow of his chance acquaintance from Saint Louis, he'd take up the scoundrel's trail. The stub-stemmed pipe of carved applewood was yet in his pocket as was his pouch of tobacco, and once he'd found the dirt-soiled little stocking cap of gray wool that covered his skull's nudity, he felt better.

"Shoulda knowed better, Etty," he remarked thoughtfully to the nanny rubbing against his leg. "They's Indians with white skins aplenty; bad as the old Natchez Trace."

He scrubbed ruefully with his broad short-fingered hand at the throbbing knobs left by Sile Wasson's club. Reluctantly he vented a dry chuckle. "Lucky at that, though," he told Etty. "Most lubbers like him woulda scuttled me."

And with that Jonas Beam heaved carefully up to his stubby bowed legs and set to work breaking what little camp the treachery of Wasson had left to him...

Less than half an hour after his painful awakening in the hidden grove Beam and the three tame goats were heading away down toward the trail that led to Oregon. When they reached the myriad webworks of wagon tracks cut so deeply into the grassy soil, they turned west.

Sile Wasson would be going west, reasoning that Beam would be forced to return to the Missouri River country; so the stubborn little man from Pennsylvania took up the trail.

FIVE DAYS later he came up with a wagon train—or rather, the smoking debris of what had been a train—and among the slaughtered oxen and horses found his bony gray mare. One of the mutilated bodies could have been Sile Wasson's, but even Sile's own brother could hardly have indentified him from among that sprawl of fragments.

Beam prowled the ruins, his blue eyes alert for hostiles, and salvaged three handleless knifes, a dozen axe-heads and a stack of fire-blackened metal debris that might prove useful. Now that his crude bow and arrows—their green wood fit only for the slaying of rabbits or birds—were supplemented by these weapons, he felt better.

If he could trap one of the escaped horses or mules he saw grazing near at hand he could make better time. Perhaps he could come up with one of the parties of New Englanders heading for Oregon and join them. All his life he had dreamed of the ocean while he trapped and hunted beside Lake Erie; now he was determined to see it.

He headed toward the willows fringing the water. And a rifle blasted flame and whining lead!

Jonas Beam dropped behind a bush, his stubby hands readying his poor excuse of a bow. The shot had come from the willows, and now he could detect movement there. He heard sobbing breath and decided that only one enemy lay hidden there; so he came up from the ground, his stubby legs pounding and his crooked arrow nocked and half-drawn.

He smashed through the willows. A wavering long-barreled rifle jabbed at him and his thick arms swept it aside. Then his arms dropped as he loosed the bow and its arrow. They thudded at his feet.

"A boy!" he gasped.

The tow-headed little younker sprang at Beam with clawing dirty hands, tears making tiny rivers down across his grimy freckled cheeks. He was maybe ten or eleven, and his outsize ragged shirt was as faded as his ripped gray pants. Beam caught the bony arms in his thick fingers and his foot tripped the raging boy's legs from under him. He held the lad helpless against his legs.

"Is that the way to salute a friendly vessel?" he demanded. "I come sailin' peaceable down here, an' you loose off a broadside."

The boy's twisting body slowly went lax. His slitted greenish eyes were curious. He studied Beam's square red-whiskered visage.

"You a sailor?" he demanded cu-

iously. "Fight the Britishers an' the pirates?"

Jonas Beam squirmed uncomfortably. The weakness of his stomach and his store of nautical information and misinformation had held him up to ridicule before. On the blunt frontier there was no explaining his overpowering love for things nautical —nor his physical incapability of realizing his dreams.

"In the war of 1812," he said, "I helped build Perry's fleet at Presque Isle." He had been twelve at the time and had run errands and carried water. "We sure whupped the British!"

"Snakes!" gulped the boy. And then his green eyes glared.

"Why'd you an' them Injuns kill my paw?" he demanded. "We wasn't hurtin' you."

"I didn't help them piratin' varmints," snorted Beam. "White men don't mix with redskins so."

"They was white men with the Injuns," the lad insisted stoutly.

"I bet none of 'em had a red beard, nor was bald-headed." Beam told him solemnly, sweeping off his soiled gray cap. "Scalped I was by Eries; that's Injun for wildcat. So I wouldn't team up with 'em would I?"

Beams' lips quirked under their fiery covert of whiskers. His ability to spin tall tales wasn't waning, and the lad wouldn't understand a man going bald when he was a little past twenty. Besides he wanted to help the boy forget his recent tragedy.

"Snakes!" gasped the boy. "Nope —I don't reckon you'd forget that."

"How'd you get way off here?" Beam asked.

"Pap sent me for water. Took along the rifle. Then the Injuns come an' I hid under a cutbank." He was sobbing now. "I was a coward, I expect; maybe I coulda druv 'em off."

The chunky man shook his head. "One gun wouldn't make no difference," he said. He donned his stocking cap and fished for his pipe.

"Now let's get acquainted, mate. I'm Jonas Beam. Come out from Pennsylvany aimin' to cast anchor in Oregon."

"I'm Lew Redmond." The lanky youth scuffed his bare feet. "Pap left York State after Ma died. Reckon I'll have to go back an' live with Aunt Mossy, now. But I won't like it."

Beam scratched his ear. He wasn't planning to head back east; maybe he could leave the younker at Fort Laramie.

"How about signin' on with me for a spell. Need a cabin boy, Lew, until I make port at Fort Laramie."

"Why, sure, Mr. Beam—sir," agreed the boy, grinning.

"Say aye, aye, sir," Beam smiled. "An' my first orders is get down the riverbank an' make yourself shipshape. You look like a he-coon spattered with whitewash."

"Aye aye, sir," agreed Lew.

Beam eyed the half-consumed wreakage of the wagons thoughtfully. Some of those wheels were not too far gone and the metal wagon tires were intact. With the lad in his care now, a wagon might be better than riding a horse; and maybe he could haul along enough iron scrap and wagon parts to Fort Laramie to buy more traps and an outfit. Metal was precious out here on the plains.

"Then we'll do some beachcombin', Lew," he added; "I reckon we'll pull into the fort with a cargo after all."

"TWO DAYS, maybe three, to the fort, Lew," Beam said, his half-filled bucket of goat milk tilting over the battered metal bowl. "This's Horse Creek if my navigation ain't off."

Lew was scowling at the brimming bowl. "Don't you ever get sick of that—slop, Cap?" he demanded.

Beam grinned lop-sidedly. For a week now the boy had been calling him Cap and begging for tales of the sea. And he'd been dredging his memories of the handful of sea stories he'd read for material. The more impossible his yarns sounded the better Lew liked them.

"Sure," he agreed. "But since I was caught in a storm on Lake Erie I been this way. Blowed for a week, an' that lake's rougher'n the Atlantic.

Turned me inside out I expect."

He nodded, proud to be telling the truth for once. Of course it was the only time he'd been in a boat and there had been no waves. And he'd been sick five minutes after leaving the shore...

"Since then milk's about all I can stomach, Lew. That an' a little lean meat an' dried apples."

Lew had gone to the patched-up, coverless old wagon they had contrived for some of the dried venison strips his rifle had supplied. Now he yipped out something and came racing to the cooking fire.

"Wagons!" he cried tensely. "Looks like a bull train, Cap!"

Beam cradled the rifle under his arm and stubbed down toward the trail paralleling the river. Out past the sagging shapes of the three recaptured mules his eyes moved until he saw the loom of a line of oxdrawn canvas-topped wagons. In the gathering dusk he counted eighteen of the high-bowed vehicles.

"Cap." Lew clipped Beam's thick wrist with his bony fingers. "Please don't make me go back East. I'll scrub the deck's an' tend the galley if you let me stay. Don't tell them; say you're my uncle, Cap. Please!"

Beam grunted. Doggone little shaver was a good shipmate. Beam had never been married or had much to do with brats. And he had a mental picture of Lew's aunt from what the boy had said. Sour old crab!

"You're on, mate," he agreed; anyhow until we dock at Laramie, Lew."

Lew laughed. "Great snakes!" he yelped, "you're a real pal!"

"Build up the fire, Lew," said Beam sternly, "and get that venison out. I expect the crews of these ships comin' might enjoy some hot victuals."

Lew saluted. "Aye aye, sir," he agreed, and pranced away.

A horseman materialized out of the gloom.

"I'm Lamont," he identified himself, his bearded craggy features stern. "Wanted to make Horse Creek early, but some of the oxen got sore feet. Then we seen your fires."

"Who's headin' your outfit?"

"Just me an' my nephee. We got waylaid a piece an' only the two of us come clear. Been waitin' to join a fleet like yours, Lamont."

"We'll probably lay over here a day or so," the rider said. "Our wagons need repairin' and the bullocks need rest."

"Toss your anchor anywhere, Lamont. An' then come over to the fires. Lew's in the galley broilin' the best part of a deer."

The lean man nodded curtly and rode back toward the toiling string of wagons. And before long a ghostly circle of wagons had linked up with their own battered craft, and there was the sound of tired laughter and conversation around the blazing fires.

And, taking over most of Lew's job at the cooking fire, was a shapely, sharp-tongued woman.

"She's the Widow Ford," Cranston explained to Beam. "Her husband died back a piece. Musta been quite a relief.

"Y'know she even tries to tell me how to fight Injuns, Beam, an' I been headin' trains down to Sante Fe an', lately, up north, nigh onto twelve years."

He laughed, slapping his thigh.

"The way she's pattin' your nephew around looks like she thinks he needs a ma. You bein' single an' her bein' in the same fix now."

Jonas Beam choked on the draught of goat's milk as the frontiersman's hand smacked across his broad back.

"LOOKS LIKE we done all right salvagin' all that metal," Beam told Lew. "We got more money an' supplies now than when I left the Missouri. That bull train sure needed them tires an' other parts."

The bull train was pulling out of camp, and with their emptied wagon and the four mules, the fourth brute an ill-favored skeleton they had acquired in trade, they waited to fall in line.

Ten of the great wagons were freighters laden with supplies and trading goods, but the other eight

belonged to pioneers who had attached themselves to the train for better protection. And it was with these ragged outfits that they were throwing in their lot.

"Lew," called a smooth feminine voice beside them. "Would you like to ride with me today?"

And the brown plump comeliness of Edith Ford's face was smiling into Jonas Beam's bewildered eyes. Beam sucked at his dead pipe, panic riding his thoughts. Cranston's warning of a day ago came to him. Of course she was pretty; even her rough dress couldn't hide the shapely contours of her body, but she had the tongue of a shrew.

She was making it clear that she thought Lew needed a mother as well as an uncle. Maybe, he told himself, she could be persuaded to take the boy off his hands so he'd be free to keep west. But that would mean Lew would be entirely in her power. And he couldn't maroon the poor lad.

Lew twisted. "I, I dunno," he said unhappily. "Maybe Cap's got somethin' planned for me."

"I'm sure Mister Beam wouldn't object ..." the widow began, her even white teeth flashing, and her eyes sharp.

"Sorry, Missus Ford. We're headin' off north a piece. Heard about some craft the Injuns pirated an' I aim to pick up whatever's valuable. 'Probably we'll make port at Laramie about when you do, ma'am."

So it was that the battered wagon turned off from the train and took to the empty country to the north. There, above the line of freighters and homesteader's wagons, they came upon the ancient wheel ruts of other wagon trains. And, much to Beam's amazement, before noon they came across the rusting black debris of a half-dozen burned wagons.

"Wasn't lyin' to that female after all, Lew," he laughed, stepping carefully over a heap of grass-knotted bones. "We'll pull into port with cargo after all."

"You're some handy with tools an' at smithin', Cap," said Lew curiously. "Way you fixed up that old forge an' made them bellows so's you could fix them tires."

"I worked at smithin' a bit back in Pennsylvany," Beam nodded, tugging at a charred blend of wood and rusty iron. "Thought maybe once I hit Oregon I'd set up shop."

"You done most everything ain't you, Cap!" said Lew admiringly. "Shootin', sailin' —I bet you seen China an' them Sandwich Islands too!"

Beam's teeth champed at his pipestem and he grunted.

"Lend a hand here, younker," he said, "an' belay so much talkin'. We've work to do."

FOR MORE than three hours they were busy knocking apart the pitiful wreckage of what had once been sturdy Conestogas and Murphy's. Why the outfit had wandered so far away from the regular trail beside the river Beam could not but wonder. Perhaps they were trying a short cut or the old wheel ruts were impassable at the time.

Seven wagons had been destroyed here, and the salvaged parts soon made Beam's makeshift wagon creak. He saw that he would have to pick up another load if he wanted it all.

"She's low in the water now, Lew," he told the boy reluctantly. "Better stop heavin' cargo aboard."

The boy nodded, but his sun-toughened bare toe dug at a cindery section of the wagon box. The lump of charred wood fell apart and a little roll of stained coins, twenty in all, lay exposed.

"Gold!" gulped Beam, staring. "Cached away so's they wouldn't be found. An' now the owner's dead! No way knowin' who he was. Reckon it's yours, shipmate."

Lew shook his head emphatically. "It's ours, Cap." he said; "half yours or I let it lay."

Beam's big hand pawed thoughtfully at his hand-knit cap. His fiery mop of a beard hid the twisted grin on his lips. He started to say something, choked, and swallowed the words. But an unfamiliar warmth

was burning through his squat thick body, making his ears pound.

Dang the boy, he'd been all set to drop him off at the fort and head West. And now he couldn't. Lew was like a faithful pup, doing everything, he could to please him. And he'd grown to like the gangling younker to. Fact was it would be mighty lonesome for him if Lew went off somewhere...

"Pick it up, Lew," he grunted, brusquely as possible. "We'll use it to buy us a stout schooner an' some more stock."

"An' then we'll hit out for Oregon an' the ocean!" Lew was scooping up the coins.

"Maybe," Beam said gruffly. "Maybe." His eyes were roaming away out over the undulating green levels around them. "Seems like we're already there, sometimes, seein' the grass rise an' fall in the wind. Dunno maybe if this isn't better'n water, Lew."

And he led the way to the sagging wagon seat with a puzzled Lew at his heels.

NIGHT CAUGHT them far behind the bull train. They made camp near a concealing clump of cottonwoods and scrub and the exhausted boy fell asleep before he had finished eating. Beam covered Lew with his blanket and then took the rifle and catfooted out into the gloom for a swing around the camp.

Indians didn't usually bother large outfits except to beg or steal what they could—only the little trains had lone wagons were plundered and destroyed. So until they could rejoin the train Beam intended to keep as careful a watch as possible.

So it was, as he circled further downstream, that he saw a tiny flare of light, a fire, and moved silently toward it. Another outift it might be—or a party of the white renegades and their outcast Indian companions who were already making the westward trek so hazardous.

He made out peaked roofs of three Indian lodges as he crept close, and after a time watched the staggering men about the fire as they drank fiery whiskey from one of a half-dozen kegs. Two white men he counted, and three warriors, and among them moved a stout blanketed squaw.

Beam wriggled closer, all the woodland skill acquired in the distant Pennsylvania hills ultilized in that silent approach. Sodden though the savages were with raw whiskey their ears might yet be keen enough to hear any alien sound. And with the odds so heavy against him he could take no chances.

The white renegades moved apart, coming toward him in the darkness. He felt sudden rage as their figures loomed against the pale radiance of the fireglow. That lanky shape on the right, with the hunched right shoulder could only be one man—Sile Wasson!

He hadn't died in the wagon-train massacre, and finding him in the sordid company told its own story. Beam could piece together a plausible theory, now, of Wasson as a spy for a trail-side band of bandits...

The men halted less than three paces distant. He heard Wasson's nasal whine and the thick rumble of the other's reply. They spoke of the plunder they had taken.

"Best do them in tonight," Wasson said. "We're mighty nigh the fort, now's the time. They're too drunk Melt, an' if we figure to sell out safe now's the time. They're too drunk to fight back."

"Reckon so, Sile," the heavy voice agreed, breath sucking in wetly as the man squatted on his haunches. "Ol' Runnin' Thunder's gettin' ideas. I figure it's them or us, and' it better be us."

"Never did like mixin' with Siwashes," Wasson growled. "But maybe we better not kill the squaw, not now anyhow; I hate killin' women."

The burly man jeered. "They're worser'n the men. An' you know it. Can't let her talk to the other redskins or they'll be on our trail." He grunted. "But keep her alive until we move out if you want her."

"I expect a hatchet's best," Wasson

mused. "You take old Thunder an' I'll handle the other two bucks."

"Yep, I favor hatchets too, Sile." The bigger man stood up and headed back toward the fire. "Let's get it over with. I'm sleepy."

BEAM CRAWLED after them, his rifle clumsy to drag along but capable of accounting for one of the men. He hoped it would be the burly man; he was saving his hunting knife for the lanky Missourian who had left him for dead.

He heard the sodden thuck of hatchets and the flurry of threshing legs as the murderers struck. One of the Indians came to his feet, arms flailing, only to go down with a knife in his heart.

And then the squaw was leaping upon the white men, and the hatchet in her flat fingers split the skull of the bigger renegade. Wasson brought up his hand gun as she turned toward him and the heavy weapon thundered, twice.

The squaw slumped, fingers clawing even in death toward Wasson, and the lanky man snarled shakily as he slammed the heavy barrel of the weapon down on her skull and across her arms.

Of the six members of the camp only Wasson remained alive.

Jerkily he turned to the fire and threw on a bundle of dried willow twigs. Light flared up and Beam lifted his rifle.

"Turn around, Wasson," he ordered succintly.

"Beam!" cried the outlaw. He choked and stepped backward. "I wondered about you. They took me prisoner an' figured they'd finished you off. I just now managed to get loose."

Beam laughed shortly. "I ain't exactly blind, Wasson," he said. "They wasn't any sign around camp that morning. You was alone.

"I aim to take you along to the fort for trail, much as I'd like to scuttle you right here."

Wasson relaxed, his hands dropping. "I'm sure I can convince you an' them..." he began, then suddenly dove sideways to the frail shelter of a lodge's skin wall.

His revolver was out of the holster as he touched earth, and Beam's rifle cracked a fractional second after the short weapon's blast. The revolver did not fire again. It lay on the damp soil a foot from the sprawling limpness of Wasson's body.

Beam reloaded the rifle reflectively, his eyes alert on the bodies ringing the little fire.

"Looks like he won't swing from the yardarm," the little man grunted disgustedly, "after all."

"Hey, Cap!" a breathless whisper came out of the shadows.

"So you heard the ruckus an' come cruisin' over, Lew," said Beam as the boy came out into the light. "I didn't figure a cannon goin' off could waken you."

Lew grinned sheepishly. "I woke up just after you left, Cap. So I come trailin' after. Me an' that nanny, Etty. She got loose."

Beam pawed at his beard. "Once we get these bodies heaved overboard we'll start checkin' up. We got maybe ten-twelve horses, half a dozen rifles, some revolvers, an' lots of blankets. I reckon we'll have to make packs for the horses an'..."

THE HORSES strung out back of the creaking old wagon as the thick walls of Fort Laramie loomed close ahead at last. Every one of the packs on their backs were crammed with valuables from the Indian camp.

"We'll sell what ain't apt to be claimed, Lew," Beam was saying, "an' next voyage out this way maybe we'll sell the rest of it."

"You mean you ain't goin' on to Oregon, Cap?"

Beam didn't answer right off. His jaws clamped down on his capacious-bowled pipe of hickory and his eyes were sweeping over the green and gray-patched world ringing them about.

Out there a vast sea of glass and desert extended. From the Missouri to the Rockies the grassy sea undulated, so immense that the bull trains and pioneer outfits were less than

specks of sand. He could voyage across that great expanse, his boat a covered prairie schooner, all his life, and even then not touch at every port.

Instead of living by the Pacific and eating out his heart to be afloat on its vastness he could remain here.

"Nope, Lew. I'm not." He didn't look at the boy. "You can take your share of the cargo an' head on for Oregon—maybe that widder'll let you ride along with her. You got a stake now."

Lew didn't say anything and Beam kept talking, trying to explain his change of plans.

"This's like the ocean, Lew, only its green instead of blue. I aim to freight supplies an' skins along the trail. Look what we done this voyage at salvagin' wagon part an' tools. More trains are headin' west every year.

"Winters I'll trap, an' summers I'll be a beachcomber cruisin' the trail. What with my stomach an' everything, I..."

His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"That's for me too, Cap," cried Lew. "We'll built a fort, maybe buy a ranch, with the money we make. We'll get more wagons—cover all the trails..."

Beam heaved a relieved sigh and grinned into his beard. He'd worried maybe the yonker'd want to keep on west to Oregon. Now he'd have a partner to share the lonely trails with. Wouldn't do to show how pleased he was though. Maybe Lew'd get headstrong.

"Want you should clean up an' polish them guns an' saddles we took off them pirates," he said severely, "once we anchor at the fort. An' patch up that shirt you're wearin' before I fetch some buyers around. Little things like that lose money."

Lew's lips twitched at the gruff tones of Beam but he saluted. He'd caught the suspicious twinkle in the deep blue eyes.

"Aye aye sir," he said. "Any further orders?"

Beam scowled as ferociously as he could at the boy.

"Sheer away from Mrs. Ford," he growled, "while we're in port. She's some concerned that you get a new ma. An' I'm not!"

"Leave it to me," bragged Lew, "when I finish tellin' about what a drinker you are she'll chart a new course!"

But Beam wasn't listening. He'd spotted a battered copper bucket some immigrant had lost off beside the rutted way. He pulled up and jumped to the ground, his round face shining.

THE END

Came The Revolution

True Fact Article

by John L. Cooney

IT WAS A bright, sunny day in Los Angeles—that September 22, 1846. It was just the sort of a day one would expect to see the gay caballeros choose to flirt with the pretty senoritas in front of the mission.

But instead of gaiety, an air of impending doom seemed to hang over the city. Muttering groups of men gathered on the dusty street, glancing from time to time with undisguised hatred at the locked corral of the Bella Union Hotel. In front of the corral, two well-armed United States Marines marched back and forth.

Inside the corral, six of Los Angeles' leading citizens, proud California Dons, were chained to logs. They had been arrested that morning on the order of the commanding officer of the American troops occupying the town. They were hostages, being held to, as Gillespie explained, "insure the good behavior of the town."

The United States and Mexico were at war. A month before, Commodore Robert F. Stockton of the United States Navy and General Charles Fremont of the United States Army had marched into Los Angeles. With bands playing and flags flying, they notified the little pueblo that it was captured—to which no one offered the slightest objection.

Firmly convinced that the Californians were cowards, Fremont and Stockton had marched away again after a brief stay. To guard their conquered realm, they had left Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie with fifty well-armed men, a bad case of nerves, and a complete lack of tact.

The young lieutenant immediately ordered the citizens of the little pueblo to turn all their weapons in to him at his headquarters in the Bella Union Hotel. The word "weapons" he interpreted as "all firearms, lances, swords, axes and any other cutting instruments over six inches in length." He also succeeded in making a general pest of himself by forbidding all fiestas and other social gatherings, establishing a curfew and closing all roads leading in and out of the town.

His men, taking their cue from the lieutenant, were overbearing and insolent.

But, in spite of his precautions, Gillespie was still nervous. Every time he saw two *pobladores* passing the time of day on the street, he imagined a revolution was brewing. Evidently he was not aware that he had been handed a hornet's nest, or at least he was ignorant of the habits of the hornet and its capacity for sheer cussedness when aroused.

So he stirred up the hornets a bit by taking hostages.

THE CROWD of ominously muttering men in front of the Bella Union Hotel was growing by the hour. Lieutenant Gillespie stood on

the roof of the hotel watching the crowd. Beside him was a burly Marine sergeant. "Sergeant, take some men out there and break up that crowd," Gillespie said. "Arrest any trouble-makers!"

"Yes, sir!"

The task was easier described than done. Clearing the Angelenos from in front of the Bella Union Hotel was like sweeping back the ocean with a broom. But, by dint of much shouting and vigorous prodding with musket butts, the street was finally cleared.

All the rest of the day and long into the night, Gillespie maintained his uneasy vigil on the Bella Union roof. He was a brave man and a good soldier, as later events proved, but he just didn't understand people—or, at least, he didn't understand the proud Californians.

Suddenly Gillespie stiffened. Was that a light north of town? Hastily focusing his field glasses, he peered for a long minute... Yes, there was a mysterious, flickering light.

Gillespie had good reason to be nervous. In a small glade north of the town some twenty young men had gathered, in violation of Gillespie's rulings, to listen to Cerbulo Varela, one of the pueblo's gay young blades.

Varela stood on a tree stump in the circle of light formed by the flickering torches and made a stirring appeal for revolt. "Who will be the Californian so cowardly as not to rise in arms to destroy our oppressors?" he cried melodramatically. "To arms, compatriots! Raise the cry of war!"

"War!"

"Drive the invaders out!"

Back on the roof of the Bella Union Hotel, Gillespie saw the small band of Californians galloping headlong toward the hotel! In answer to Gillespie's shouted commands, the sleepy-eyed, half-dressed Marines tumbled out onto the street, firing wildly at shadows and one another.

"Sergeant! Sergeant Murray!" Gillespie finally made himself heard over the pandemonium and general confusion.

"Yes, sir!"

"There must be two hundred of those Californians! And all well-armed! The cowards wouldn't attack us otherwise! We'll retreat to the top of that little hill yonder until morning!"

But when morning dawned, Gillespie found the entire country in revolt, and his small force was completely surrounded. Jose Maria Flores, Andres Pico, brother of the last Mexican Governor of California, Pio Pico, and Jose Antonio Carrillo, great-grandfather of motion picture actor Leo Carrillo, had buckled on their swords to take over the leadership of the revolutionary armies. The Californians were flocking to their command.

WITH ALL of his supplies cut off and completely surrounded by a superior force, Gillespie realized that his only chance was to get word to Commodore Stockton in Monterey.

Thus the immortal ride of Juan Flaco. Juan Flaco, a skinny Swede sailor, rode six hundred and thirty miles in seventy hours through hostile country to carry the message to Stockton.

Stockton immediately ordered Captain Mervine, commander of the frigate *Savannah*, to sail for Los Angeles. But before Mervine arrived, Gillespie, his water-supply exhausted, surrendered. Under the terms of the surrender, he was allowed to leave the city unmolested. Gillespie, in turn, agreed to board an American merchantman in San Pedro harbor and leave Los Angeles for good.

But Gillespie had plans of his own. Once aboard the merchantman, he sat tight waiting for re-enforcements. The Californians, without even the semblance of a Navy, could only watch from the cliffs overlooking the harbor.

When the *Savannah* finally sailed into San Pedro, Gillespie and Mervine held a council of war. By now,

Gillespie realized that the Californians could put no more than two hundred men on the field. On the other hand, the combined American forces totaled some five hundred men—all of them well-armed. And the *Savannah* could furnish some artillery support.

"That's my plan," Gillespie said. "We can retake Los Angeles and teach those rebellious Californians a lesson they won't forget!"

General Jose Antonio Carrillo and his "army" of a hundred men had been assigned to the defense of the coastline. Carrillo watched the American troops land and begin their march to Los Angeles. He intended to fight, but he wanted to choose his own battleground—out of range of the *Savannah's* big guns.

Carrillo's men were superb horsemen—among the finest the world has ever seen. But about all they had in the way of weapons were the eight-foot lances made by the blacksmiths at San Gabriel Mission and an ancient cannon.

There's a story behind the cannon. It had originally belonged to a smuggler or a pirate ship. But for more than fifty years, it had stood on the Plaza in Los Angeles as an ornament. When Stockton and Fremont "captured" Los Angeles, one of the Los Angeles families had lugged it away and hidden it. When the revolt began, it was presented to Carrillo.

Being a ship's cannon, it was unmounted and not too serviceable as a fieldpiece. But the resourceful Carrillo mounted it on an old wagon. An ancient white mule, so decrepit it could hardly walk, furnished the motive power. The only way this magnificent piece of artillery could be aimed was to seesaw the wagon tongue up and down. It was fired by applying a lighted cigarette to the touch-hole.

The padres at San Gabriel Mission made the gunpowder, and somewhere Carrillo dug up six cannon balls. Thus armed, he sallied forth to do battle with the invader.

As a military tactician, Captain Mervine, commanding the American forces, was little short of incredible. When he saw the dashing troop of horsemen armed with lances and their funny old cannon, he formed his men into a hollow square. Every time the Californians fired their cannon, the ball would mow down sailors on both sides of the square.

Carrillo's tactics were dictated by necessity. Inasmuch as he had only six cannonballs, it was necessary to have two caballeros ride completely around the enemy and pick up the spent cannonballs after they had been fired, bringing them back to the cannoneers so they could be used over again!

Every time the Americans tried to charge the cannon, the Californians would lasso the thing and drag it and the mule to a safer position.

When one of the cannonball retrievers would catch up, they would stop, re-load, and, when one of the boys got his cigarette tuned up, start all over again.

The Californians had barely enough powder for one more shot when Mervine and his men marched back to San Pedro. There, he buried the nine sailors that had been killed, boarded the *Savannah* and sailed North to report to Stockton.

BUT THE battle of San Pedro wasn't over. Stockton was enraged when he heard what had happened to Gillespie and Mervine. Taking command of Mervine's and Gillespie's men, and bringing fresh troops of his own, Stockton sailed for San Pedro with blood in his eye.

Carrillo was no fool; he knew that his beloved cannon wouldn't be of much use against Stockton and his twelve hundred men. But he had another trick up his sleeve.

It was early in the morning when the American troops began their landing operation. Stockton, accompanied by the chastened Mervine, stood on the deck of his flagship *Congress*, personally supervising the landing.

Suddenly Mervine swore and pointed to a cloud of dust on the San Pedro cliffs. Stockton snatched his field glasses and trained them on that suspicious cloud of dust.

"Horses! And men! Hundreds of them! How many men did you say were in this rebel army, Mr. Mervine?"

"About eighty, sir."

"Eighty! There are more than that now! Every man in the country must be up there on those cliffs! Hmm, it's probably an ambush."

"Look, sir, that gap in the hills to the North!"

"Lord! More of them! They must have three thousand men waiting for us to land."

"Those Californians are excellent horsemen, too."

"I can't understand this, Mervine —unless units of the Mexican army have joined these rebels. We know they wouldn't be riding to meet us unless they were well-armed."

"I think you're right, Commodore. They probably intend to ambush us."

"All right, Mr. Mervine. Have the men return to the ships."

Far up on the San Pedro cliffs, Carrillo chuckled as he saw the Americans return to their ships. The three ships wasted no time in upping anchor and sailing out of the harbor.

Carrillo turned to the twelve-year old boy who acted as his aide. "Tell the men they can turn the horses loose now," he said.

As far as the eye could see, riderless horses raced up and down the cliffs, herded by the caballeros. Other men rode up and down dragging cowhides with their reatas, raising the huge clouds of dust that had prevented Stockton from seeing how many of the horses were riderless.

Carrillo was hailed as a hero by the delighted Angelenos who believed that they had won their revolution. True, the Americans were still fighting in other parts of California, but as far as Los Angeles was concerned, things were quiet. General Flores was elected governor, and the only fighting the Angelenos did was among themselves.

IT WASN'T until December that the rebels were called upon to fight again, and this time the attack came from an unexpected quarter.

When the United States declared war on Mexico, General Stephen Kearney was ordered to march to California. On the way, he met Kit Carson who was riding to Washington with dispatches telling of the conquest of California. The famous scout had left Los Angeles before the revolt, and, of course, knew nothing of the events that had transpired.

Acting on Carson's information, Kearney sent most of his force back to New Mexico, and, requisitioning the reluctant services of Carson as a guide, pushed on with one hundred and fifty of the crack United States Dragoons.

It was near San Pasqual, a small valley between San Diego and Los Angeles, that Kearney was met by forty cavalrymen under the command of Lieutenant Gillespie. Gillespie told Kearney what had happened and also warned him that General Andres Pico and his band of California lancers were somewhere in the neighborhood.

Kearney merely sniffed. He wasn't afraid of "a bunch of greasers". And besides, hadn't Kit Carson told him about the Californians' cowardice?

Late that evening, Kit Carson spotted Pico and his men. Kearney immediately laid his plans to attack the next morning.

As a matter of fact, the sudden appearance of Kearney and his Dragoons was quite a shock to Pico; he had no idea that Kearney, or any other American troops, for that matter, was within a hundred miles. Pico had an "army" of sixty men—dashing young caballéros from neighboring ranchos. They were magnificently mounted and were probably the finest horsemen who ever rode to battle. But they were armed only with the long eight-foot lances.

The morning of December 6th, 1846, was cold and dreary. A driving rain made it almost impossible to see more than twenty feet ahead. The plaintive notes of the trumpeter's *Boots and Saddles* just before daybreak must have sounded more like a funeral dirge than a call to battle.

Kearney divided his men into three groups and started down the hill into a twisting arroyo. As the first men rode out onto the dry bed of the arroyo, Pico attacked.

In that first wild surprise attack, Kearney's advance guard was almost completely annihilated. Only the arrival of the main body of troops saved them.

At the appearance of this larger body of troops, the Californians turned tail and fled, with Kearney and his men in hot pursuit. Suddenly, when the American troopers were well strung out, the Californians wheeled and attacked again. Kearney's men began dropping from their saddles as if by magic.

Kearney never knew what had happened, but he had been the victim of a diabolic trick. Pico had stretched a reata between two of his caballeros, tieing the two ends to their saddle pommels. Partially hidden by the darkness and the driving rain and riding at a dead gallop with this fifty foot leather rope stretched between them, the two caballeros literally swept the Americans from their saddles.

In the wild melee that followed, Kearney himself was wounded and thrown from his saddle. According to the story, he would have been killed as he lay on the ground but for Pico who knocked away the threatening lance with his sword and gallantly helped Kearney to his feet.

The mules hauling the American cannon stampeded carrying it over to Pico. The enthusiastic Californians immediately began to use it.

SUDDENLY, at the height of the battle, the Californians withdrew. According to Pico's later account, Gillespie and some of his men had been mounted on magnificent horses—gifts from Don Juan Bandini of San Diego. When the Californians saw these splendid animals running loose, they forgot all about the battle and gave chase, leaving Kearney in possession of the battlefield.

Since Kearney ended up in possession of the battlefield, he considered the engagement a victory. But, for the size of it, the Battle of San Pasqual was one of the bloodiest that American troops have ever experienced outside of an Indian massacre. Some fifty Americans were killed or wounded, while not a one of Pico's men got so much as a scratch! Victory it might have been, but Kearney could well echo the words of Pyrrhus after the battle of Heracles—*One more such victory and I am lost!* *

WHEN PICO and his men returned, Kearney had dug in at the top of the hill. Although Kearney's position was comparatively safe, he had no water and many of his men needed medical attention badly. Late that night, Kit Carson and a young Navy Lieutenant, Edward F. Beale, stole through Pico's lines. Walking and running, sometimes crawling they made the seventy mile trip to San Diego to get help from Stockton.

Kit Carson never recovered from the ordeal of that trip. Although he lived for several years afterward, his health was permanently impaired. Beale later became famous as the man who attempted to introduce camels into the army for use as pack animals.

Stockton marched to relieve Kearney, and Pico retreated without a fight. With their confidence somewhat shaken, Stockton and Kearney joined forces and marched on Los Angeles. There, on the banks of the Los Angeles river, they and their men proved they were good soldiers

**This may not be an exact translation, but it's the gist of Pyrrhus' observation. RWL*

as they easily defeated an army under the joint command of General Flores and General Carrillo.

Stockton issued a proclamation naming every Californian who had taken part in the revolt as a traitor.

But the story isn't over yet. The wily fox, Pico, was still at large.

After the Battle of San Pasqual, Pico and a few of his caballeros had gone to El Rancho De La Provedencia in the San Fernando Valley—where Universal Studios now stand. General Pico was somewhat worried over Stockton's latest proclamation. But the game's never over until the last card has been played.

General John Charles Fremont was marching south from Santa Barbara. He had already entered the San Fernando Valley when Stockton and Kearney marched into Los Angeles.

Pico knew that Fremont would have to go through Cahuenga Pass, so he spent his time getting ready for the American general.

When Fremont and his men arrived at the pass, they were met by a messenger who informed them they were to advance no further—that General Pico knew what the Americans were up to. Fremont looked around. Here and there along the rocky sides of the pass were what appeared to be cannon! Probably fifty of them! Fremont decided to wait until morning before attempting to force his way through the Pass.

That night, American sentries could see literally hundreds of campfires dotting the hillsides.

When morning dawned, General Pico himself rode over to the American camp. After the formalities had been completed, Fremont said, "Well, General, shall we fight it out, or do you want to surrender?"

"Personally, General Fremont," Pico said through an interpreter, "I prefer peace. But, of course, I'll hold a council of war with my men. What sort of terms will you offer?"

Fremont hesitated and then asked, "What were all those fires I saw last night, General?"

"I have such a rebellious crowd that I have to billet them apart," Pico explained apologetically. "They're always at each other's throats; they fought like devils on the way down here."

Fremont was puzzled. None of the reports he had received had mentioned anything about a force the size of this. Fremont had an idea that Pico was engaged in some form of trickery, and he must have known that Los Angeles was in the hands of American troops. But perhaps he couldn't forget the fate that Kearney had suffered at the hands of this same General Pico.

Whatever the reason, the terms he offered Pico were quite generous—the most important item being a grant of general amnesty for the Californians who had taken part in the revolt.

Pico accepted Fremont's terms, and, on January 13, 1847, the Treaty of Cahuenga was signed, thus ending the Mexican War as far as California was concerned.

The messenger was no sooner on his way to Los Angeles with a copy of the treaty than Pico revealed his final trick. The cannon weren't cannon after all! They were merely huge logs mounted on ox-carts and partially concealed by rocks. The "rebellious army" numbered twenty-two very tired men—and they had good reason to be tired. They had been up the entire night tending hundreds of fires!

Thus ended the Los Angeles Revolution—the last time that armed knights sallied forth to do battle.

THE END

Barry's head ached and the strangers weren't sympathetic

Alias Ben Thompson

by A. C. ABBOTT

Barry Craigmont had to play a part and do a convincing job of it — or else!

BARRY CRAIGMONT could hear someone groaning steadily. It was a faraway sound that had no meaning for him until he realized that it was issuing from his own lips.

Abruptly the groaning ceased as consciousness quickly returned. And Barry made three rapid discoveries. First, he had a splitting headache. Second, he was lying on the floor in a dingy, poorly furnished cabin. Third, three men were standing over him, looking down with distinctly hostile glances.

Three chapters out of the same book, Barry thought grimly. The men were of assorted sizes, but they were curiously alike in their rough range garb, dark stubbled faces, unrelenting stares.

"Get up," the tallest one said harshly, "and tell us who you are."

"Yeah," the middle-sized one added meanly, "and it better be good."

With the help of a chair, Barry Craigmont struggled to his feet, his head whirling. He saw his two ivory handled sixguns lying on a rough table, out of reach. Probably just as well. Barry would have been the first to admit that he probably

couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, even if he were inside with all the doors and windows shut.

A vicious prod in the stomach brought Barry's attention back to the three men. The tall one had drawn his gun and rammed it into Barry, just above the belt buckle.

"Talk, mister," he said, and there was no mistaking the menace in those narrowed eyes.

Barry swallowed painfully as he realized that if he didn't say the right thing, this man would kill him. But what was the right thing?

Barry Craigmont was the star performer in a group of professional actors called the Western Players who were touring the frontier with shows intended to enlighten westerners in matters concerning their own way of living. His curiosity regarding the type of characters he was portraying had led him to don his cowboy costume, rent a horse from the livery stable, and ride out—to this.

But would these men believe that being a good actor was important? Barry doubted it, very much.

He decided abruptly that, until he found out what type of character he should portray in this particular show, he would develop a bad case of amnesia.

"Who are you?" the man demanded, prodding Barry with the gun, which was now cocked. "Answer me."

"I—" Barry began, and stopped blankly. "My name is—" He stopped again, gaping at them foolishly, as if they should be able to tell him who he was. Then he shook his head dazedly. "I can't seem to remember," he mumbled, and added truthfully enough; "my head aches like hell."

"Aw hell, Dave," the middle-sized man said to the tall one, "you hit him too hard."

"Not quite hard enough," Shorty amended, and spat at the woodbox.

"He'll remember," Dave snarled, lifting the gun for a blow at Barry's face. "You better talk up, feller!"

NO MAN IN the world could collapse more realistically than Barry Craigmont when the script called for it; and he figured the script should call for it about now. He lifted a hand to his head, took a step backward to catch his balance, apparently failed, and crashed to the floor.

"Aw, hell," Shorty grunted. "Put a bullet in him."

"Huh-uh," Dave said quickly. "We're takin' chance enough sticking this close to town with that bank loot without having no corpses layin' around. I don't think they'll ever look this close to town, but they might."

"And if they do," Al spoke up with sudden inspiration, "maybe this feller could help us fight 'em; he was packin' two guns."

"Yeah," Shorty drawled doubtfully, "but can he use 'em?"

"I'll bet he can," Al declared. "He looks plenty salty to me."

"Can't be too salty," Shorty pointed out, "if he don't even know hisself who he is. I say give him a harp and get it over with."

"Nope," Dave said. He seemed to be the leader of the three. "Reckon Al's got a good idea there. We'll see when he comes to this time can he remember who he is. If he's somebody that can use them two guns and will agree to help us if the posse jumps us here, we'll keep him. If he ain't nobody, or if he won't agree to help us, we'll knock him on the head and plant him under the floor."

That was the cue Barry had been waiting for. He knew now what kind of character he had to play—if he were to continue playing at all! They wanted an outlaw gunman, did they? All right. When he woke up this time, he'd be Ben Thompson, the notorious gambler and gun fighter.

Barry was an artist at the quick draw, which he had practiced diligently for his various western stage roles. However, unfortunately or otherwise, depending on the point of view, he had never fired anything except blank cartridges, which were not particular about the location of the target. He vowed now that, before he got into another jackpot of this sort, he would do a little practicing with those guns.

He wondered what time it was. He had to be back at the theater in Ashfork by eight o'clock that night or miss a performance for the first time in his career. Mike Mahaney, the director of Western Players, had protested strongly against his going on this jaunt this afternoon, but Barry was adamant.

He was portraying cowpunchers and he realized, since coming to this western country and actually meeting cowpunchers, that he did not stand or walk the way cowboys did. What better way to get the feel of it than to get on a horse? He had been on horses only twice in his life, and both times the horse had won. The first animal merely jumped a ditch, but the second deliberately bucked, an act which Barry considered most unsportsmanlike.

However, the animal he had rented this afternoon had proved quite civilized, in an ancient sort of way. He was a dignified brown creature whose long ears flopped idolently with each step he took. In no time at all, Barry had acquired that bent feeling, not only in his legs but also in his sense of direction. He had stumbled onto this cabin and, at Dave's cordial invitation, had stepped inside. Then he had awakened on the floor with a headache.

Barry remembered now that he had heard about the Ashfork bank being robbed last night, but he had dismissed the news as having no connection whatever with him.

He hoped his captors knew Ben Thompson only by hearsay. Barry himself had no idea what the famous desperado looked like. Until today he had never cared, but now he hoped fervently that Thompson was tall, wide of shoulder, light-haired and gray-eyed.

From what he had heard of Thompson, Barry figured the man must have a forceful personality, a cold dominating presence. Barry knew his life depended on his ability to throw a chill into these men, to convince them beyond a doubt that he was Ben Thompson, whose name —he hoped would awe them into uncertainty. If they gave him back his guns, he could get the drop on them

(Continued On Page 88)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 86)

and bluff his way out.

It should be an interesting role, and had better be well done!

BARRY Craigmont, alias Ben Thompson, sighed deeply and opened his eyes. A grunt from Dave greeted him as he sat up.

"Feeling better?" Dave wanted to know, without sympathy.

"Yeah," Barry answered slowly and soon rose to his feet. Ben Thompson, he felt, would be a much more forceful character standing up than sitting ungracefully on the dirty floor.

"Maybe you're ready to talk now," Al suggested. "Remember who you are?"

"Certainly." Barry eyed the three men with cool, detached calculation before he asked levelly, "Ever hear of Ben Thompson?"

The three men took an involuntary step backward at mention of that name. Their mouths fell open, and instant fear whipped across their faces.

"My Gawd," Shorty breathed, strangling. "I thought he was in Dodge."

"He was," Barry answered, with just the right stress on the second word. "But Dodge has suffered a devastatin' change in climate lately; it's getting hotter'n hell over there."

Al laughed nervously.

Nonchalantly Barry pulled out paper and tobacco and rolled a cigarette while these men looked him over with fresh interest. Then he asked abruptly, "What's the idea, battin' a stranger over the head?"

No one seemed capable of answering that question. Al and Shorty darted fearful glances at Dave, whose eyes were narrowing thoughtfully.

"So you're Ben Thompson, are you?" he asked softly.

Barry stared at him with casual contempt. "What about it?"

"Maybe I ain't convinced," Dave said slowly.

Barry took one step forward, his face expressionless, his eyes as hard as grade A flint. "Are you callin' me a liar?" he asked coldly.

Dave had a gun in his hand, but something about this cold-eyed, un-

armed stranger took the sap out of him.

"I—" He gulped and tried again. "I reckon I'm convinced, Mr. Thompson."

Barry stepped back, letting his cold glance travel unwaveringly over the three men. "I asked a question," he said deliberately. "What's the idea of whangin' me on the head when I stepped in here?"

Shorty spoke up hastily. "We wasn't expectin' friends."

"Do you consider me a friend?" Barry asked with cold reserve.

The outlaw blinked. "I sure hope you ain't a enemy," he blurted; "anyhow, you're on our side of the law fence, I reckon."

"Yeah," Al said slowly, his eyes lighting. "What's your specialty these days, Mr. Thompson?"

Barry allowed a mirthless grin to spread across his face. "I been sort of partial to stages lately," he said evenly.

"Well, by golly!" Al was delighted as he turned to Dave. "If a posse jumped us here, they'd think twice before they started anything if we was to tell 'em Ben Thompson was with us."

Barry looked around the room noncommittally, as if surveying it for the first time. He saw then that a dirty sack, probably containing the bank loot, was on the table beside his guns. His glance came back to Al.

"You want me to agree to help you fight in case the posse shows up," he said then. "Is that it?"

"That's it."

"And suppose I don't agree?"

Dave lifted his gun a little uncertainly, but the grim light in his eyes was clear enough. "Reckon you don't need to ask that question."

"Reckon not." Barry shrugged, and a faint contemptuous smile crossed his face. "All right. I haven't lost any law dogs up in this country, but keep your hands off me!"

"Yessir," Shorty agreed with alacrity.

"How long do you figure on stayin' here?" Barry wanted to know.

"Just until tonight," Dave explained. "It's not safe now, with

(Continued On Page 90)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 89)

posses in the hills, but after dark we'll move on. You can go part way with us, and then you can go anywhere you please."

"Do I get my guns?" Barry demanded forcefully.

"Not yet." Dave shook his head emphatically. "I ain't forgettin' that we banged you on the head. If it comes to a fight, you'll get 'em sure, since you'll be too busy to use 'em on us. Otherwise, you'll get 'em when we part company tonight."

For a moment Barry hesitated, studying the man coldly, wondering how far he dared push this bluff. Then he shrugged, displaying a magnificent disregard for life, death or bank robbers. "Suits me," he said indifferently.

But it didn't suit him at all. His life would be in no danger—he hoped—if he followed the plans laid down. But Barry Craigmont fully intended to be back in the town of Ashfork when the curtain went up at eight o'clock that night. A hasty glance at his heavy gold watch told him that it was already well after five.

"Ben," he said to himself with grim humor, "you've got to do something and do it quick."

HE DEBATED trying to reach the guns lying on the table, but discarded that idea almost instantly. He couldn't do anything with those guns except make a noise—and get himself killed. No, he'd have to think of something more practical than trying to hit anything with a gun.

He had rehearsed a scene one time in which he, as hero, had calmly and efficiently laid out three villians with his fists. If these gentlemen of the owlhoot would only arrange themselves in the proper stage positions, Barry would see how well that plan of action worked out in real life.

He lounged around the cabin, hoping that Ben Thompson was not a talkative sort of individual, waiting for his chance. The men eyed him with fearful respect, glad enough to leave him alone. And then his chance came, suddenly.

(Continued On Page 92)

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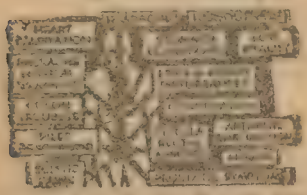

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 90)

Barry was standing at the rear of the room, facing the front door, when he realized that the three men had assumed the proper positions. Shorty was on his right, facing slightly toward him. Al was on the left, with his back to Barry, while Dave was directly in front of him not over five feet away.

Shorty was close, so close that Barry didn't have to move out of his tracks to deliver the first blow, which landed with explosive force behind the outlaw's left ear. Shorty went down and stayed down, while Barry leaped behind Al to fling a hard left arm around the man's throat, cutting off his wind.

So far so good. At this point Dave should close in to join the battle, at which time Barry would shove Al's head down, butt Dave in the stomach with it, and then, when the two men fell on top of each other, proceed to batter them into insensibility before they could get up.

However, Dave was not following the script. Instead of closing in, he clawed out his gun and stepped quickly to the side to get his sights on Barry.

Barry whirled, dragging the struggling Al in front of him, and for the next several moments they kept that up. Each time Dave side-stepped. Barry turned so that Al's body stayed between him and that gun.

Barry was running out of breath when he realized suddenly that Al was no longer struggling. The man was limp in his arms, choked into unconsciousness. Barry didn't want to choke him to death, nor did he want to step out in front of Dave's gun.

Then Dave lunged forward, raising the gun for a quick slash downward. Barry managed to twist aside so that the gun barrel missed him, but he tripped over his spurs and lost his grip both on Al and on his temper.

"Follow the script, dammit!" he yelled indignantly.

"Huh?" The robber stopped, the gun poised above his head for another blow, his eyes and mouth open blankly. "What'd you say?"

(Continued On Page 94)

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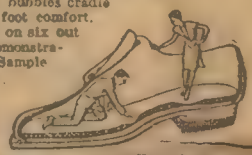

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 92)

Taking careful aim on the point of the man's chin, Barry fired his right fist, with every ounce of his hundred and ninety pounds behind it. Dave did a backward swan dive, sailing ten feet across the room before he collided with a chair, turned a somersault and stopped, face down on the floor.

Barry staggered back against the wall, fighting for breath, surveying the wreckage. The three men were sprawled in assorted attitudes of oblivion, and Barry grinned crookedly.

"He who hits first, laughs last," he told them philosophically.

HE FOUND a long rope coiled in a corner of the room and picked it up. He dragged the three men together, back to back, and proceded to wind the rope around them until they would be completely helpless when they regained consciousness. Barry himself could not have untied the knots he invented on the spur of the moment.

It was backbreaking work, trussing the three inert bodies, but he finally accomplished it to his satisfaction. He straightened up completely out of breath, his clothes soaked with sweat.

He had to rest a minute before he could cross to the table, where he procured his two ivory handled guns and shoved them into holsters. If he lost those two "prop" guns, the director would have a conniption fit. Sight of the sack of bank loot gave him an idea, which he promptly carried out.

Two of the men were on their sides while the third, on top of the pile, was lying face up. With infinite care Barry set the sack of coin in the middle of the man's chest.

"Yo ho ho," he murmured with a wry grin, "and I could use the bottle of rum."

Then he crossed to the door. He stopped for one last look around the cabin and was assured that those three would go anywhere until someone came along to cut the tope. Barry lifted his hat in mock formality.

"Gentlemen," he drawled pleas-

antly, "Ben Thompson bids you a fond farewell."

He glanced at his watch, found it was almost seven o'clock, and dashed out to his horse.

Dire necessity has produced more than one invention. Now it invented a new way of getting on a horse in a hurry. Barry himself could not have done it again had he tried, which he didn't care to do.

The horse, throwing his head in terror over the sudden attack, promptly took off and Barry had his hands full, trying simultaneously to hold on to his hat, the reins, the saddle horn, and his dignity. But he was jubilant.

"Into the saddle!" he cried. "We'll ride in all directions at once."

Mentioning direction reminded him that he had no idea which way to go. He didn't know where the town was, he didn't know where *he* was, he didn't know by this time where the cabin was. However, the horse seemed to have ideas. Briefly Barry pondered where he would be going if he were this horse, and quickly decided that he would be heading for the nearest restaurant—er—feed bag. He hoped that's what the horse was doing. At any rate, they were making awfully good time going somewhere.

The country was rolling grassland, the low hills dotted with juniper and scrub cedar. It was nearly dark now, but the horse was still on his rapid way.

Topping out a low hill, the horse stopped abruptly. Almost too abruptly for Barry, who bumped his nose on the animal's neck. By the time he got straightened up in the saddle and got his hat off his eyes, he was aware that directly below him, at the bottom of a steep slope, was a compact of horsemen. Dark, silent, their attitude subtly menacing. Barry thought he caught a faint glint of steel in front of one of them, possibly a law badge, and he started to hail them.

"There's one of 'em!" someone yelled suddenly, and a rifle bullet followed his words up the hill.

The horse leaped wildly to the side as the bullet took the tip off his left

(Continued On Page 96)

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WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 95)

ear and went on to ventilate the side of Barry's shirt.

Barry Craigmont forgot that he was wearing beautiful, huge rowelled, silver-inlaid Chihuahua spurs. Forgot, in fact, what spurs were for. When the horse jumped, Barry reacted instinctively.

The muscles of his legs grabbed convulsively for the slippery barrel between them while his heels gripped hard the only solid thing they could find—the horse's ribs. Naturally, the horse jumped again. Naturally, Barry gripped him even tighter.

BARRY WAS never sure afterward how it happened, but instantly they were tearing down that slope like a whole swarm of bats fresh out of Hades. Barry was aware of startled curses, the flash of guns, the buzz of hornets past his ear. Whether he wanted to or not, he was charging the enemy.

Events at the cabin had gone too swiftly for Barry to feel the deep possibilities of his new role, but now he grasped them clearly and a wild spirit rose within him to meet the occasion.

"Lay on, Macduff!" he bellowed magnificently. "And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" Then he added glibly, "Make way for old Ben Thompson! Yee-ee-ee-ow-w-w!"

They struck the startled posse amidships. There was a tremendous crash, the thud of falling bodies. Barry saw that two horses were down, others milling wildly—without riders. But his own mount was still going. And Barry Craigmont was still on top of him!

Then they were out in the open, the yelling, blazing posse left behind in its own dust. An exultant laugh burst from Barry's lips. The terror sticken horse, with the Chihuahua spurs clamped in his sides and bullets dusting his tail, had levelled off into the smooth dead run that allows his rider fairly to sail.

Barry was having no trouble staying on now. Since everybody else was shooting at something, he

yanked out the two ivory handled six guns and, with what he hoped was Thompson-like abandon, emptied them at the stars.

They were still going like that when they hit the edge of town. Dogs and kids scattered, squawking, before the flying hoofs. Since the livery stable was at the far end of the street, the horse was still doing his best when they reached the theater.

This was where Barry wanted to get off, so he hauled mightily on the reins. The horse, like the good cowpony he had been, promptly stuck his tail in the ground and stopped.

Barry, however, didn't. A little thing called momentum took him in a smooth swift glide up the horse's neck, where he tripped over the long ears, turned a complete flip flop and landed on his feet before the open mouthed director.

"Howdy, pardner," said Barry blandly. "Nice evenin', ain't it?"

Then he was running for the dressing room, the director fogging behind him with his cigar puffing smoke like a one horse steam engine. Barry grabbed up a can of grease paint and started smearing his sweat stained face.

"The sheriff'll be here in a minute or two," he said without preliminaries. "Tell him he'll find his three bank robbers tied up out there."

"Out where?" the director wanted to know.

"Out— Hell, I don't know!" Barry threw up his hands in exasperation. "That horse I was riding must have left some tracks. He was hitting the ground every thirty feet or so. Tell the sheriff to follow 'em backwards and he'll find those men."

The director tried to draw on his cigar with dignity, only to find that he had bitten it in two. He threw away the stub.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded, without any dignity at all.

"I've been putting on a show," Barry replied calmly.

"Yeah?" Barry wondered how one little word could take on so much sarcasm. "Any curtain calls?"

Barry stepped back from the mirror to inspect the hasty makeup job. It would have to do. Then he grinned ruefully, and his voice was fervent.

"I hope not," he said. "But d'you know, Mike. When I walk on that stage tonight to portray a cowboy who has just completed a long hard ride, it is certainly going to be authentic!"

THE END

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